

# The Conundrum of multi-level politics in the UK after devolution: the case of the Scottish Liberal Democrats in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election

18 June 2013.

**Annie Thiec**

DOI : 10.58335/individuetnation.271

 <http://preo.ube.fr/individuetnation/index.php?id=271>

Annie Thiec, « The Conundrum of multi-level politics in the UK after devolution: the case of the Scottish Liberal Democrats in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election », *Individu & nation* [], vol. 5 | 2013, 18 June 2013 and connection on 07 December 2025. DOI : 10.58335/individuetnation.271. URL : <http://preo.ube.fr/individuetnation/index.php?id=271>

PREO

# The Conundrum of multi-level politics in the UK after devolution: the case of the Scottish Liberal Democrats in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election

## *Individu & nation*


18 June 2013.

vol. 5 | 2013

Les consultations électorales du 5 mai 2011 au Royaume-Uni

Annie Thiec

DOI : 10.58335/individuetnation.271

 <http://preo.ube.fr/individuetnation/index.php?id=271>

---

Introduction

1. A decidedly difficult campaign for the Scottish Liberal Democrats
2. Disastrous results for the Scottish Liberal Democrats
3. The predicament of the Scottish Liberal Democrats since 2010

Conclusion

Appendix 1: Scottish Parliament Election Results 2007 & 2011

References

---

## Introduction

- 1 Since the setting-up of the devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999, political parties have had to adapt to multi-level politics and fight parliamentary elections - whether to Westminster or Holyrood - in which interaction between the British and the Scottish arenas has been inevitable. Indeed, when contesting Westminster elections, political parties in Scotland have highlighted the main objective of a general election, that is to determine which party will form the next British government, while trying at the same time to underline the impact of the outcome of these elections on Scottish politics. In the

same way, they have fought Scottish Parliament elections on a political programme targeted specifically at devolved matters while also each presenting themselves as the party best able to defend Scotland's interests at the UK level.

- 2 As early as the 2001 general election, the first Westminster election to be held after devolution, *The Scotsman* had highlighted the dilemma facing the Scottish Liberal Democrats as they were contesting the general election in Scotland on their record in government as the Scottish Labour Party's coalition partner in Edinburgh since 1999, while being in opposition at Westminster. Indeed Hamish Macdonell, then political editor of *The Scotsman* went as far as to claim that the Liberal Democrats might be suffering from "schizophrenia"<sup>1</sup> following a comment made in London by the leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats and Deputy First Minister in Donald Dewar's Cabinet, Jim Wallace, who congratulated himself on the partnership in government between his party and the Scottish Labour Party, which brought the leader of the British Liberal Democrats, Charles Kennedy, to declare on the following day, in Scotland, that his party would never enter into a coalition government with another political party.
- 3 Ten years later, the Scottish Liberal Democrats found themselves in a more awkward position still, contesting the fourth Scottish Parliament election as an opposition party at Holyrood, while being identified with the Conservative party as their coalition partner in government in London since May 2010. How did the Scottish Liberal Democrats come to terms with campaigning in the Scottish Parliament election as a party which had been in opposition for four years under an SNP minority government in Scotland, while bearing the brunt of the scathing attacks made in Scotland on the UK Government?
- 4 This article will first focus on the campaign fought by the Scottish Liberal Democrats with a view to explaining what made it particularly difficult to handle for their leader, Tavish Scott, before dealing with the party's disastrous election results. It will then attempt to demonstrate to what extent both the campaign and the outcome of the election were emblematic of the predicament confronting the party in Scotland since 2010.

# 1. A decidedly difficult campaign for the Scottish Liberal Democrats

- 5 The Scottish Parliament rose on March 22nd, marking the beginning of a six-weeks' campaign - the longest campaign in the history of post devolution Scotland - which was bound to be challenging for the Scottish Liberal Democrats, not least because for the first time they were fighting a Scottish Parliament election as an opposition party in the Scottish Parliament, and could not consequently campaign on their record in government, as they had done in 2003 and 2007 as Labour's coalition partner in Edinburgh.
- 6 When one compares the manifestos published by the Scottish Liberal Democrats for all four Scottish Parliament elections it appears that the 2011 manifesto, entitled "*Solutions for Scotland*", appealed essentially to pragmatism, and seemed therefore to be less ambitious, or at least to offer less of a vision for Scotland than the previous three manifestos, entitled respectively "*Raising the Standard*" (1999), "*Make the Difference*" (2003), and "*We think Scotland has a bright future*" (2007). It seemed in this campaign that in the aftermath of the world-wide economic crisis, the party conceived of its political programme in terms of problems to address and was therefore offering solutions to these problems, which paled in comparison with Alex Salmond's ambition to "reindustrialise Scotland through the green energy revolution" where he argued the Scots led the world<sup>2</sup>, regardless of whether or not one considered the outgoing First Minister's ambition to be realistic or unrealistic.
- 7 It is also worth comparing the opening lines of the foreword by Tavish Scott in the Scottish Liberal Democrat 2011 manifesto with those of Annabel Goldie in the Scottish Conservative Party manifesto, entitled "*Common Sense for Scotland*", as they were emblematic of each party's strategy in this election campaign. The first lines of Tavish Scott's introduction read: "We live in tougher times. So I want to set out real ideas for Scotland. Ideas that recognise that Scotland needs long term solutions, not short term political fixes" (Scottish Liberal Democrats 2011: 5).

- 8 By contrast, the Scottish Conservatives, although in opposition in the Scottish Parliament like the Liberal Democrats, intended to capitalise on the support they gave to the SNP minority government on several occasions in the course of the third parliamentary session, arguing therefore that some of the policies which were good for Scotland had been implemented thanks to the Conservative Party, notably the 1,000 extra police on the streets and the four-year council tax freeze. Thus Annabel Goldie's opening lines sounded like a message coming from the party in government: "The Scottish Conservatives are delivering for Scotland. In the last four years, just look at what we have achieved" (Scottish Conservatives 2011: 1).
- 9 What made the campaign itself even more difficult to handle for the Scottish Liberal Democrats was the fact that, until it tried to relaunch its campaign in the last ten days before the election by focusing on the dangers of independence, for the first four and a half weeks of the campaign the Labour Party's main strategy consisted in attacking the government in London, and focusing especially on the cuts in public spending, thereby hoping to make political capital of the unpopularity of the coalition Government and win the votes of Liberal Democrat supporters in Scotland. This inevitably resulted in putting the Liberal Democrats in Scotland on the defensive.
- 10 There was indeed little the Scottish Liberal Democrat leader could try to take advantage of in terms of popular policies implemented by the UK Government. The Chancellor's announcement in his budget statement on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2011 - that is to say on the first day of the election campaign - that the cost in fuel duty was going to be cut by 1 penny per litre was one example of a government decision which Tavish Scott could claim the Liberal Democrats had informed, as he himself had raised the issue with his Scottish Liberal Democrat colleague and Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander. As a matter of fact, Tavish Scott publicly approved of the budget unveiled by the Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, as he stated: "A UK Government that concentrates on creating jobs and cutting the costs of fuel is doing the right thing for Scotland in dealing with the tough financial times that we all live in".<sup>3</sup>
- 11 The announcement on the fuel duty cut turned out to be of little comfort to the leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, however, as

it appeared that the measure was to be financed by an increase in the tax on North Sea oil and gas revenues - from 20% to 32% - expected to raise £ 2 billion. Consequently the whole issue of the cut in fuel duty backfired: John Swinney, Finance Secretary in Alex Salmond's Cabinet, immediately accused the Chancellor of using North Sea oil revenues to "fuel his budget" while giving far too little to Scotland in return. The extent to which the UK Government's decision turned out to be a setback for the Scottish Liberal Democrats became apparent after Danny Alexander's meeting on March 26<sup>th</sup> with the managing director of AGJ Parcels, a company based in his Commons constituency of Inverness<sup>4</sup>, to discuss the impact of the government's decision on a parcel delivery company like AGJ Parcels. On this occasion, the Liberal Democrat Chief Secretary to the Treasury declared that it was "fair and right that the oil companies should be asked to pay an additional share of the extra profits they are making from the high oil price to help families and businesses".<sup>5</sup>

12 He was thereafter strongly criticised in the Scottish press for being unapologetic about the impact which the £2 billion tax rise would have on the oil and gas industry in the North East, notably in terms of investment and of jobs lost as a result: indeed on March 28<sup>th</sup>, the Norwegian oil company, Statoil, announced a moratorium on its £3 billion investment programme in the region, while on March 29<sup>th</sup>, Scottish gas owner Centrica also announced it was putting its multi-million pound investment programme on hold. Danny Alexander's presentation of the coalition government's four-year austerity programme, late in 2010, as being "common sense, unavoidable, progressive and civilised" had already made him unpopular in Scotland: his support for the drastic cuts was felt to be reminiscent of the worst attacks on Scotland by the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher's premiership and actually earned him the nickname of "the UK Government's cutter-in-chief" in *The Herald*.<sup>6</sup> Besides, not only did he not apologise for the tax increase on North Sea oil and gas profits but he claimed proudly to have been its architect. Yet, the issue was all the more of an embarrassment to Tavish Scott as he was the MSP for Shetland, where several oil and gas fields are located.

13 Tavish Scott was also confronted on two occasions with declarations made by former members of his own parliamentary group which in both cases dealt a severe blow to his leadership of the party and to

him personally. First came the decision of Hugh O' Donnell on March 26th to leave his party and stand in the election as an independent candidate for the Central Scotland region. Hugh O'Donnell had been the only candidate on the Liberal Democrat Central Scotland list to be elected in 2007 and his name was in first place again on the party list for the region in 2011. Writing in *The Mail on Sunday*, he was very critical not just of the Liberal Democrats being in government with the Conservatives in London, but also of Tavish Scott's leadership of the party at Holyrood, which he described as "dictatorial", resenting the fact that on some occasions, as for example when the SNP Government had introduced legislation aimed at setting a minimum price for alcohol, his party at Holyrood had voted tactically, against the SNP Government, instead of voting on principle. He also claimed that he and his party colleagues had been told not to air grievances about the coalition Government.

- 14 A week later, the Liberal Democrat MSP who had represented the constituency of Ross, Skye and Inverness West in the Scottish Parliament since 1999, John Farquhar Munro, publicly expressed his support for Alex Salmond as First Minister for a second term, while making clear that he remained a strong Liberal Democrat, and pledging to campaign for his party on the ground. The sitting MSP, who was standing down in this election, explained that he supported Alex Salmond not because of his politics but because he was, in his opinion, the 'best man for the job', the only politician who could ensure a more prosperous and sustainable future for Scotland.<sup>7</sup> In spite of his attempt at minimizing its impact, John Farquhar Munro's backing of the SNP leader was a major personal setback for the leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats.
- 15 Overall, the Scottish Liberal Democrat leader found himself on the defensive throughout the campaign, and seemed to be lagging behind the other party leaders when it came to promoting his party's manifesto commitments. As a matter of fact, of the three policies which Scottish voters considered as their top priorities, as the ICM poll for BBC Scotland on April 11<sup>th</sup> showed, namely reducing the waiting time for patients to see a cancer specialist to two weeks, keeping up the number of police officers and maintaining free university education for all Scottish students (Stephen, Herbert *et al* 2011: 11-12), none was a specific commitment of the Scottish Liberal Democrats: the first

policy was also promoted by Scottish Labour; free university education was the official policy of the SNP and was also supported by Scottish Labour, while the SNP, the Scottish Labour Party and the Scottish Conservatives all committed themselves to maintaining police numbers. Besides, other issues, on which the Scottish Liberal Democrats stood apart from the other three main parties, such as the creation of a single police force, which they opposed, did not rank high among voters' main priorities, however.

## **2. Disastrous results for the Scottish Liberal Democrats**

- 16 The results obtained by the Scottish Liberal Democrats in the election were by far the worst they had ever had in a Scottish Parliament election, and indeed the party had not fared so badly in an election in Scotland since 1974, except at the European Parliament election of 1989.
- 17 Both their constituency and their regional shares of the votes - 7.9% and 5.2 % respectively - were halved compared to the 2007 election (see Appendix 1). Only two candidates were elected in the 73 constituencies, in Orkney and in Shetland, the latter being the seat held by the then leader of the party, Tavish Scott. In addition, even in these two constituencies, both sitting MSPs saw their share of the vote decrease significantly, on a slightly lower turnout in both cases: Liam McArthur in Orkney lost almost 12 percentage points, while Tavish in Shetland lost 19 percentage points compared to the 2007 election.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the party was left with no MSP representing a mainland constituency at Holyrood, while on the regional vote, it was allocated three seats, bringing the total number of Liberal Democrat MSPs in the new parliament to five. From sixteen candidates elected in 2007 the parliamentary group was therefore reduced to just five members.<sup>9</sup>
- 18 The Scottish Liberal Democrats came fourth in the election, behind the Conservative Party, like in the three previous Scottish Parliament elections, but whereas in 2007 the gap between the two parties had narrowed considerably, this time the Liberal Democrats only got 261,186 votes all over Scotland, which represented about half the



votes won by the Conservative Party (522,619).<sup>10</sup> The party lost nine of the eleven constituencies it previously held, six of which had been represented by a Liberal Democrat MSP in the Scottish Parliament ever since the first election in 1999.

- 19 One constituency is emblematic of the disaffection of Liberal Democrat voters in Scotland: Caithness, Sutherland and Ross, in the Highlands and Islands region, was a constituency which had been represented at Holyrood by a Liberal Democrat MSP since 1999, and was consequently considered as a safe seat for the party in 2011, with a 'notional' majority<sup>11</sup> of 12,030 votes for the Liberal Democrat candidate. As a matter of fact, this constituency was ranked 19<sup>th</sup> only on the SNP's list of target seats. Yet, the contest was won by the SNP candidate, Rob Gibson.
- 20 The fact that the sitting Liberal Democrat MSP, Jamie Stone, stood down in this election and that the party therefore was putting up a new candidate cannot alone account for its defeat in this Liberal Democrat stronghold. Rob Gibson was elected with 48.4% of the votes cast, thereby improving his share of the vote by 16.6 percentage points on his 2007 performance; the Liberal Democrat candidate came second, but with only 22.3% of the votes, which represented a loss of 18.1 percentage points, while the Labour candidate came third with 19%, an increase of 5.8 percentage points.
- 21 Indeed while four of the eight constituencies which make up the Highlands and Islands were represented by a Liberal Democrat MSP in the third Scottish Parliament (2003-2007), only two - Orkney and Shetland - returned a Liberal Democrat MSP in 2011, while five of the seven MPs<sup>12</sup> representing the region at Westminster are Liberal Democrats, among whom the former British leader, Charles Kennedy, the party's chief whip in the Commons, Alan Carmichael, and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in the UK Coalition government, Danny Alexander. In fact, although it was in the Highlands and Islands that the party's share of the regional list vote was the highest (12.1%), no Liberal Democrat candidate was elected for the region, while the SNP, having taken 47.5% of the regional list vote, succeeded in gaining one regional seat, despite having won the contest in six of the eight constituencies.

- 22 In the other seven regions the party's share of the vote ranged from 1.4% to 6.8% (Denver 2001b: 44), and in three of them<sup>13</sup> the share of the vote was well below the critical threshold of 5% under which it is virtually impossible for any party to secure a seat on the regional list vote (Curtice 2011: 44).
- 23 The poor performance of the Scottish Liberal Democrats in the election was predictable considering that the party had never reached 10% of voting intentions in any of the opinion polls carried out during the election campaign (Curtice 2011: 56): indeed the party received at best 9% of voting intentions on the constituency and on the list votes, and at worst 4 and 3% respectively.
- 24 On May 7<sup>th</sup>, Tavish Scott announced that he was standing down as leader of his party declaring: "Thursday's Scottish general election result was disastrous and I must and do take responsibility for the verdict of the electorate. The party needs a new direction, new thinking and new leadership to win back the trust of the Scottish people". His analysis of his party's disastrous results confirmed officially what many activists and candidates, in the run-up to the election, had feared was likely to happen, as he stated: "What we need to recognise is that the UK coalition did cause our vote to either stay at home or move straight to the SNP. People are not happy about us being in the UK coalition and that is what we need to look at and understand." <sup>14</sup>
- 25 Nick Clegg himself only made one visit to Scotland, on April 28<sup>th</sup>, therefore just one week before polling day, and at a time when a new poll of polls predicted that his party would lose half the seats it held in the Scottish Parliament. In any case, the presence of the Deputy Prime Minister seemed to be more of a liability for the Scottish party leader than an asset. In an article entitled "Mission Impossible as UK party leaders come calling", the *Herald's* political commentator, Iain Macwhirter, wrote: "You wonder why they bothered. The UK leader, Ed Milliband, and the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, came to the aid of their Scottish parties yesterday, but it was mission impossible", before adding about Nick Clegg that "he would probably have been better saying nothing at all". <sup>15</sup>
- 26 One may wonder therefore to what extent the fate of the party portrayed in *The Scotsman* as being "once the kingmakers of Scottish politics"<sup>16</sup> was sealed on May 12<sup>th</sup> 2010, when the British Liberal

Democrat leader officially became Deputy Prime Minister in David Cameron's Government.

### 3. The predicament of the Scottish Liberal Democrats since 2010

- 27 The Scottish media throughout the campaign seems to have held the view that the Liberal Democrats' partnership with David Cameron's Conservative Party in the British government would consign the party in Scotland to oblivion in the 2011 Holyrood election. In this regard, the opening lines of Alison Rowat's article based on an interview with Tavish Scott just a few days before polling day are representative of the battering he suffered in the press during the campaign:

When going to interview Tavish Scott it's hard to know whether to take a tape recorder or a Ouija board. The leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats is widely held to be a dead man walking, a politician so burdened by his Westminster colleagues' coalition with the Tories that he'll be lucky if his party keeps half of its 16 seats.<sup>17</sup>

- 28 The decision of the Liberal Democrats to enter into a coalition with the Conservative Party after the Westminster election of May 2010 was bound to be particularly difficult to come to terms with for Labour's one-time governing partner in Scotland. Indeed, in the run-up to the 2011 Holyrood election, the Scottish Liberal Democrats were identified with the Conservative Party in government in London, and consequently bore the brunt of the attacks on the party at Westminster for having reneged on several of their key electoral commitments, notably the abolition of tuition fees and free care for the elderly, as well as for helping the Conservative Party to impose their policies and above all the drastic cuts in public spending.
- 29 It was undoubtedly the vote in the House of Commons on December 9<sup>th</sup> 2010 aimed at allowing universities in England and Wales to raise tuition fees of up to £9,000 which dealt the most severe blow to the party in Scotland, as it made the Liberal Democrats appear as propping up the Conservative Party in London and fostered a feeling of betrayal among Liberal Democrat supporters in Scotland. Even though the additional tuition fees voted by the British Parliament

would not apply in Scotland, where the graduate endowment fees were abolished under the SNP minority Government in April 2008, the decision would inevitably have an impact on Scottish universities since it would increase the funding gap between English and Scottish universities.

- 30 Beside the fact that five of the eleven Scottish Liberal Democrat MPs voted with the Government - while four voted against and two abstained - which in itself came as a shock to many party supporters in Scotland, the adoption of the Government's plans thanks to the Liberal Democrats was seen as a betrayal because it meant that the party reneged on a longstanding commitment to abolishing tuition fees, a pledge made in every manifesto the party had published - whether for British or Scottish elections - since the fees were first introduced by the Labour Party Government in 1998.
- 31 There is no doubt therefore that in this election the Liberal Democrats in Scotland paid the price of being the Conservative Party's junior partner in the coalition government in London, as Tavish Scott himself publicly acknowledged halfway through the campaign, arguing that the unpopularity of the coalition government in London was largely to blame for his party's poor standing in the polls in the run-up to the Scottish election. In this context, the Scottish leader endeavoured to distance himself from the Conservative Party. Thus, in an interview with *The Sunday Herald* on April 17<sup>th</sup>, he claimed that as he had grown up with Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister he had developed what he described as "anti-Tory instincts".
- 32 In fact, the ordeal facing the party in Scotland was epitomized by their leader's efforts to distance himself from his party at Westminster, while also making a desperate attempt, in the last week of the campaign, at regaining popularity by claiming that his party, because it had accepted to be part of the Conservative-led coalition government in London, could - and did - "temper" the government's policies, and by arguing that if they had been alone in government the Conservatives would have "burned Scotland at the stake".<sup>18</sup>
- 33 In the end, the Liberal Democrats in Scotland were identified with the unpopular policies implemented by the coalition government in London, and it seems to be the case that whereas at the UK level the party moved to the centre-right under the leadership of Nick Clegg,

Liberal Democrat voters in Scotland moved in the opposite direction (Herbert, Stephen *et al* 2011: 32). Analysis of the election results by David Denver has shown that Liberal Democrat voters did not seem to have massively switched to the SNP; rather, they seem to have turned in greater numbers to the Labour Party (Denver 2011b: 39).

- 34 Indeed the 2011 Scottish Parliament election illustrated the challenge confronting the party as a result of the multi-level nature of the British political system. Since 1999 political parties in Scotland have had to adapt to multi-level politics, with elections to Westminster and Holyrood being held under different electoral systems, and reserved and devolved matters interacting, regardless of whether they were contesting a British or a Scottish parliamentary election.
- 35 In the Westminster elections held since 1999, unsurprisingly, the British dimension of politics dominated the political debate in Scotland, since voters were asked to choose the party which would form the next British government; besides, the constitutional question, which had been at the centre of the public debate in Scotland in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was no longer an issue in the general election campaigns post devolution (McEwen 2005: 128). Yet, one British party, the Liberal Democrats, was particularly keen to bring Scottish politics into the 2001 and 2005 Westminster election campaigns, thereby trying to take advantage of the multi-level political system which had given them access to government in Scotland. The British Liberal Democrat manifestos therefore tried to capitalise on the achievements made in Scotland thanks to the Liberal Democrats being in government – notably the abolition of up-front tuition fees and the introduction of free care for the elderly – so as to win votes in England. The Scottish manifestos, meanwhile, underlined the benefits for Scotland of having a larger Liberal Democrat representation at Westminster which could then press for extra resources for Scotland.<sup>19</sup>
- 36 What is perhaps more surprising is the fact that in the Scottish Parliament elections of 2003 and 2007, the Scottish Liberal Democrats should try to make Westminster party politics bear on the outcome of the Scottish elections, which confirms that Scottish Parliament elections were analysed as ‘second-order elections’, that is to say elections which had no direct impact on the national government – in

this case the British government – and yet whose outcome was influenced by national party politics (Reif and Schmitt 1980). In the first case, the party manifesto included a foreword by the British Liberal Democrat leader, Charles Kennedy, who criticised Labour in government in London for not having abolished upfront tuition fees or introduced free care for the elderly, which, he argued, proved that Labour could not be trusted to govern alone; in the second case, the Scottish Liberal Democrat leader not only congratulated himself on the good results obtained by his party in Scotland in the 2005 general election<sup>20</sup>, but also attacked the Scottish Labour leader for taking orders from the Labour Party in London.

- 37 In a similar way, by devoting a large part of its campaign in the 2011 election to attacking the British government, the Scottish Labour Party tried to take advantage of the fact that Scottish Parliament elections might be used by the Scottish electorate to express their approval or disapproval of the policies implemented by the Government in London, and of the two parties in government in London, the party which was the more exposed to lose votes in Scotland was the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

## Conclusion

- 38 The difficult position the Scottish Liberal Democrats found themselves in, in the run-up to the 2011 election, raises the question of the degree of autonomy of the Scottish party which, according to its constitution, is “an independent constituent part of the federation consisting of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, the Welsh Liberal Democrats and the English Liberal Democrats”.
- 39 The four elections which took place between 2001 and 2007, whether to Westminster or to Holyrood, had in common that they were held over a period when the Labour Party was in government both in London and in Edinburgh; applying the classification of elections into ‘first-order’ and ‘second-order’ ones (Reif and Schmitt 1980), the Scottish Parliament elections could be seen as a mid-term referendum on the performance of the party in government in London, and therefore as ‘second-order’ elections.

- 40 The SNP victory in the 2007 Scottish Parliament election, however, inaugurated a new political set-up in which the party in government in London was no longer also in office in Edinburgh, and since 2007 different political parties have been in government in London and in Edinburgh at any given time. Besides, the hypothesis made by John Curtice *et al* in 2009 according to which the 2007 Scottish Parliament election had perhaps been won by the SNP more than it had been lost by the Labour Party was confirmed by the landslide victory of the SNP in 2011.
- 41 In this new political context, the concept of second-order elections as applied to Scottish Parliament elections no longer seems entirely appropriate, and political parties will have to come to terms with that; rather Scottish Parliament elections must be analysed on their terms, whether as first-order elections alongside British general elections, or as ‘More Scottish than British elections’ (Johns 2008, Schakel and Jeffery 2012, Denver and Johns 2010).
- 42 It is too early to tell whether the Scottish Liberal Democrats will find the “new direction, new thinking and new leadership” which Tavish Scott, in the wake of his party’s electoral defeat, argued will be necessary to win back the trust of the Scottish people. Yet the message addressed to Nick Clegg by Willie Rennie as the new Scottish leader, that immediate action was needed to be taken to convince the public that the coalition was the right move, will most probably have been no cause for rejoicing for the party activists and candidates who bore the brunt of the attacks on the UK coalition government on the ground during the election campaign.

## Appendix 1: Scottish Parliament Election Results 2007 & 2011

| Parties                 | 3 May 2007             |                         |                 |                | 5 May 2011             |                         |                 |                |
|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
|                         | % of votes Const. Vote | % of votes Region. Vote | Number of seats | % of 129 seats | % of votes Const. Vote | % of votes Region. Vote | Number of seats | % of 129 seats |
| Scottish National Party | 32.9                   | 31                      | 21+26=47        | 35.6           | 45.4                   | 44                      | 53+16=69        | 53.5           |
| Labour Party            | 32.2                   | 29.2                    | 37+9=46         | 36.4           | 31.7                   | 26.3                    | 15+22=37        | 28.7           |

|                             |      |      |         |      |      |      |         |      |
|-----------------------------|------|------|---------|------|------|------|---------|------|
| Scottish Conservative Party | 16.6 | 13.9 | 4+13=17 | 13   | 13.9 | 12.4 | 3+12=15 | 11.6 |
| Scottish Liberal Democrats  | 16.2 | 11.3 | 11+5=16 | 12.4 | 7.9  | 5.2  | 2+3=5   | 3.9  |
| Scottish Green Party        |      | 4    | 0+2=2   | 1.5  |      | 4.4  | 0+2=2   | 1.5  |
| Independents                |      |      | 1       |      |      |      | 1       |      |

## References

- 43 Curtice, John / McCrone, David / McEwen, Nicola / Marsh, Michael / Ormston, Rachel (2009). *Revolution or Evolution? The 2007 Scottish Elections*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- 44 Curtice, John (2011). "The 2011 Scottish Election: Records Tumble, Barriers Breached", in : *Scottish Affairs*, 76/summer 2011, 51-73.
- 45 Curtice, John / Steven, Martin (2011). *The 2011 Scottish Parliament Election*. Electoral Reform Society.
- 46 Denver, David / Johns, Robert (2010). "Scottish Parliament Elections: 'British not Scottish' or 'More Scottish than British'?", in *Scottish Affairs*, 70/winter 2010, 9-28.
- 47 Denver, David (2011a). "The New Scottish Parliament Constituencies", in: *Scottish Affairs*, 74/winter 2011, 45-59.
- 48 Denver, David (2011b). "Another 'Historic Moment': The Scottish Parliament Elections 2011", in: *Scottish Affairs*, 76/summer 2011, 33-50.
- 49 Herbert, Stephen / Burnside, Ross / Earle, Murray / Liddell, Greig / McIver, Iain (2011). *Election 2011*. (= SPICe briefing; 11/29), Edinburgh: The Scottish Parliament.
- 50 Johns, Robert (2008). "Credit where it's due? Valence Politics, attributions of responsibility, and multi-level elections", Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston MA, 28-31 August 2008.
- 51 Liberal Democrats (2011). "Change that works for you – building a fairer Britain", Manifesto 2010.
- 52 McEwen, Nicola (2005). "Adapting to Multi-Level Politics: The Political Parties and the General Election in Scotland", in *Scottish Affairs*, 53/autumn 2005, 119-135.



- 53 Reif, Karlheinz / Schmitt, Hermann (1980). "Nine Second-Order National Elections: A Conceptual Framework for the analysis of European election results", in *European Journal of Political Research*, 8/1980, 3-44.
- 54 Schakel, Arjan / Jeffery, Charlie (2012). "Are Regional Elections Really 'Second-Order' Elections?", in *Regional Studies*, first published online June 15, 2012.
- 55 Scottish Conservatives (2011). "Common Sense for Scotland", Manifesto 2011.
- 56 Scottish Liberal Democrats (2011). "Solutions for Scotland", Manifesto 2011.
- 57 Scottish Liberal Democrats (2010). "Change that works for you- building a fairer Britain", Manifesto 2010.
- 58 Scottish Liberal Democrats (2007). "We think Scotland has a bright future", Manifesto 2007.
- 59 Scottish Liberal Democrats (2005). "The Real Alternative", Manifesto 2005.
- 60 Scottish Liberal Democrats (2003). "Make the Difference", Manifesto 2003.
- 61 Scottish Liberal Democrats (1999). "Raising the Standard", Manifesto 1999.
- 62 Scottish National Party (2001). "We stand for Scotland", Manifesto 2001.

---

1 *The Scotsman*, 24 May 2001.

2 Alex Salmond at the launching of the SNP manifesto at the Royal Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow on April 14th. Words quoted in *The Herald*, April 15<sup>th</sup> 2011.

3 Quoted in *The Herald*, March 24<sup>th</sup> 2011.

4 Danny Alexander is MP for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey.

- 5 Quotation posted on the MP's website: [http://www.dannyalexander.org.uk/news\\_detail.asp?newsID=176](http://www.dannyalexander.org.uk/news_detail.asp?newsID=176) (accessed on June 21<sup>st</sup> 2011).
- 6 *The Herald*, December 28th 2010.
- 7 John Farquhar's statement was posted on the SNP website on April 4<sup>th</sup> 2011.
- 8 Liam McArthur received 35.7% of the votes (- 11.8), and Tacish Scott 17.5% (- 19.2).
- 9 In the 1999 and 2003 elections 17 Liberal Democrat candidates were elected to the Scottish Parliament.
- 10 In 2007, the Scottish Liberal Democrats had obtained 556,903 votes, compared to 618,748 votes for the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party.
- 11 As a result of the changes to the Holyrood constituency boundaries recommended by the Boundary Commission for Scotland in 2010, which affected significantly 42 of the 73 constituencies, the new boundaries were applied to the 2007 constituencies and the votes cast in each constituency in 2007 were reallocated to the new constituencies thereby providing 'notional' results on which predictions could be based for the 2011 election. (Denver 2001b:38)
- 12 The other two Highland and Islands MPs belong to the SNP.
- 13 In Central Scotland the Liberal Democrats obtained 1.4% of the vote, in Glasgow 2.5% and in West Scotland 3.2%. The three seats won by the party on the regional list vote were therefore in Mid Scotland and Fife, North East Scotland, and South Scotland.
- 14 Quoted in *The Scotsman*, May 7<sup>th</sup> 2011.
- 15 *The Herald*, April 29th 2011.
- 16 *The Scotsman*, May 4<sup>th</sup> 2011, "Salmong deserves a second term", p.2.
- 17 *The Herald*, May 2nd 2011.
- 18 Quoted on the frontpage of *The Scotsman* on April 27<sup>th</sup> 2011 (interview of the Scottish Liberal Democrat leader, Tavish Scott).
- 19 The 2005 Scottish manifesto claimed that out of the savings and additional revenue which a Liberal Democrat government at Westminster would secure, it would be able to "deliver additional resources amounting to £1.8 billion over the term of the Westminster Parliament".

20 The party won 22.6% of the votes in Scotland, which represented an increase of 6.3 percentage points on its 2001 results, and gained two seats from Labour, while also coming into second place before the SNP.

---

## English

As early as the 2001 general election *The Scotsman* underlined the dilemma facing the Liberal Democrats post devolution, as the party seemed to be torn between the two levels of governance in Edinburgh and London. Indeed, whereas the Liberal Democrats had been Labour's partner in government in Scotland since 1999, at Westminster, they were in opposition, and in the British general election campaign, the two parties were rivals in the race for power.

Ten years later, the Scottish Liberal Democrats found themselves in the position of contesting the fourth Scottish Parliament election as an opposition party at Holyrood, while being identified with the Conservative party as their coalition partner in government in London since May 2010.

How did they come to terms with campaigning in the 2011 Scottish Parliament as a party which had been sitting on the opposition benches in Edinburgh for the past four years, while bearing the brunt of the attacks on the UK coalition government in Scotland?

This article will first focus on the specific circumstances which made the campaign particularly difficult to handle for the Scottish Liberal Democrats, before looking into the party's disastrous election results. Finally it will attempt to highlight the predicament facing the party in Scotland as a result of the multi-level nature of the British political system after devolution.

## Français

Dès la campagne électorale du printemps 2001, lors des premières élections législatives britanniques organisées après la mise en place du nouveau parlement écossais, le quotidien écossais *The Scotsman* avait souligné des divergences d'opinion entre le numéro un des Libéraux-démocrates écossais et le leader du parti à l'échelle du Royaume-Uni, allant même jusqu'à parler de « schizophrénie », tant le parti semblait tiraillé entre les deux pôles de gouvernance que constituaient les nouvelles institutions écossaises d'une part, et le gouvernement central d'autre part. De fait, les Libéraux-démocrates étaient au pouvoir à Édimbourg depuis 1999, ayant accepté de former un gouvernement de coalition avec les Travaillistes écossais, alors qu'à Westminster ils siégeaient dans les rangs de l'opposition.

Dix ans plus tard, la situation était inversée puisque le parti se trouvait dans l'opposition à Édimbourg depuis les élections de 2007, alors qu'il était au gouvernement à Londres aux côtés du Parti conservateur depuis le mois de mai 2010.

Comment les Libéraux-Démocrates écossais ont-ils fait face, dans le cadre de la campagne pour les élections au parlement écossais du 5 mai 2011, à ce

contexte politique nouveau de nature à les placer en porte-à-faux vis-à-vis de leur électorat ?

Cet article s'intéressera tout d'abord aux circonstances politiques qui ont rendu cette campagne particulièrement délicate pour les Libéraux-démocrates écossais, ainsi qu'aux résultats désastreux obtenus par le parti lors de ce scrutin. Il tentera ensuite de mettre en évidence les difficultés auxquelles le parti est confronté en Écosse en raison du caractère 'multidimensionnel' du système politique britannique depuis 1999.

---

### **Mots-clés**

Dévolution, élections écossaises, Libéraux-démocrates, système politique multidimensionnel

---

### **Annie Thiec**

Maître de conférences, Centre de Recherche sur les Identités Nationales et l'Interculturalité (CRINI), EA 1162, Université de Nantes, Chemin de la Censive du Tertre, 44312 Nantes Cédex 3 – annie.thiec [at] univ-nantes.fr

IDREF : <https://www.idref.fr/137179448>

ISNI : <http://www.isni.org/0000000357381767>