The Future of Scottish Politics

INTRODUCTION

Speculation about the future of Scottish politics is easy; prediction is much more difficult. This final chapter attempts to predict on the basis of the speculations of the respondents to two surveys: the Scottish Election Survey and the Scottish Referendum Survey, both of 1997. These speculations are much more relevant to the future of Scottish politics now than they might have been in the past, because the new Scottish Parliament will allow popular views about the future to influence that future as never before. Nevertheless, even in a democracy the future is not determined by speculation, however representative; in particular, the imagination which people bring to bear on politics will itself change in response to the coming of the Parliament, whereas the views we summarise here have largely been formed by the existing constitutional structures and ways of making policy.

The chapter analyses three aspects of the future. The first relates to expectations of the Scottish Parliament. We saw in Chapter Six that expectations on policy were the strongest predictors of vote in the referendum. But what about expectations of the Parliament as a new democratic body – its responsiveness to Scots, or its capacity to represent Scotland to the wider world? How do these expectations about democratic effectiveness relate to expectations about policy? Are democratic expectations any more strongly related to a sense of
national identity than was the referendum vote (Chapter Six)? And will democratic expectations be a stronger influence on how people vote in elections to the Scottish Parliament than expectations about policy or attitudes to the political parties? In short, this first dimension of analysis concerns the ways in which the new Parliament might operate.

The second dimension is how it might evolve. Once it is set up, the main constitutional question in Scottish politics will be whether the country will move towards full independence. How likely do people expect that to be? Is any evolution in that direction feared or desired? Are the people who expect a move to independence those who have low expectations of the Parliament in relation to policy or to democratic effectiveness? Does expecting independence express an aspect of Scottish identity? On the other hand, what residual support is likely to remain for the current constitutional position – that is, for no elected body at all or for a weaker one than will be set up in 1999?

How this develops will depend as much on the standing of the Scottish political parties as directly on popular views. Is there evidence that the Conservatives could begin to recover their position in the Parliamentary elections? If so, from which other parties would they be likely to gain extra votes? Is the SNP likely to perform better in Scottish elections than in those to Westminster? This is the position in Catalonia, after all, where the main nationalist party does much better in elections to the Catalan Parliament than in state-wide elections to the Cortes in Madrid; as we saw in Chapter One, several opinion polls in spring 1998 suggested that the SNP would indeed gain in this way. In understanding the voting patterns for the Parliament, to what should we pay most attention? We can test this question for expectations about policy, about democratic effectiveness and about the likely evolution of the Parliament, and for the more diffuse concept of trusting the various parties to represent Scottish interests. So this analysis tells us which party will be best able to inherit the high expectations which people have of the new Parliament.