The implementation of the Devolution settlement in 1999 created a legislative body, the Scottish Parliament, as well as a separate political Executive, composed of a First Minister and a Cabinet, which comprises about two dozen senior and junior ministers. Although a great deal of research (Arter, 2004; Bogdanor, 2001; Bort and Harvie, 2005; Jeffery and Mitchell, 2009; McCrone, 2005, McLean, 2001; Mitchell, 2009; Paterson, 2000; Taylor, 1999; Trench, 2004; Trench, 2005) has been devoted to the functioning and achievements of the new Scottish Parliament, very few political comments have focused upon the executive power and the devolved ministers. More strikingly, the coverage and analysis of the position and achievements of the Scottish First Ministers since 1999 has been extremely limited.

This chapter aims at understanding political leadership in the original context of the newly created Scottish devolved institutions. It will focus on the conditions which have framed political leadership in Scotland since 1999, the way the First Ministers have gained and built their legitimacy and influence, faced challenges and constraints, interacted with their followership, dealt with public opinion and the media. Under which circumstances have Scottish politicians acceded to leadership position? To what extent have Scottish leaders been visible and efficient? What have they brought to the new Scottish institutional framework? Why have they failed or been successful? Stability providers, game-changers, communicators or ‘grassroots-connectors’: how have the Scottish First Ministers fitted into this leadership typology? In order to answer these questions this chapter provides an overview of the role and actions of the Scottish First Ministers since the start of the devolved institutions in 1999. It studies their political initiatives and assesses their performances, in order to explore the way the successive
incumbents have embraced their function to establish a political leadership upon the Scottish stage. The analysis starts with a description of the place of the Scottish Executive and First Ministers within the framework of the newly devolved institutions, with an exploration of the political environment and the institutional limits and constraints upon them. It then focuses on the successive Scottish leaders’ backgrounds, legitimacy and profiles. It finally moves to an evaluation of their record and legacy as political leaders, trying to outline a typology of their leadership style.

The Scottish leaders and the devolved institutions

The post of First Minister (FM) was created by the Scotland Act 1998. Under this settlement the FM is the leader of the Cabinet and primarily responsible for the formulation, development and presentation of Scottish government policy. Appointed by the Queen from among the Scottish Parliament, he is directly accountable to it for his actions and those of the wider government. He has the power to choose his ministers, who must be members of and nominated by the Scottish Parliament. In practice the First Minister has an almost free rein in order to appoint and dismiss the members of his team, and complete liberty to intervene in the policy fields according to his priorities. The First Minister is also assisted by a Deputy First Minister, a post which was originally created for the leader of the junior party in the prospect of a coalition government. The Scottish Cabinet operates in the Westminster style and on the principle of collective responsibility with weekly meetings and the assistance provided by the work of a small number of Cabinet committees.

Since 1999 Scotland has had five First Ministers as well as one acting First Minister. Labour leader Donald Dewar, the main architect of the Scotland Act, was the first FM from May 1999 until his sudden death in October 2000 (Alexander, 2005). Then Labour Henry McLeish occupied the post until he decided to resign in November 2001 over the accusations of office expense irregularities. He was succeeded by another Labour leader, Jack McConnell, who held the position of First Minister until his party came second at the May 2007 Scottish elections. Following the electoral success of his party, the SNP leader Alex Salmond became First Minister and remained in power seven and a half years – the longest-serving FM since the establishment of devolution – until he decided to resign from office following the referendum on Scottish independence. In November 2014, Salmond was replaced as