

# **An Election Campaign in Scotland**

*Dedicated to Norm Furniss*

John Bendix

February - August 2023

The original manuscript was written in 1987 and 1988

## Contents

### **Getting Involved**

Setting the scene	4	The personable politician	6
The constituency	7	Arrival	10
The national campaign launches	13	Joining up	15
The Scottish campaign begins	17	A very long first day	19
Settling into campaigning	23	Getting the word out	25
The local press	27		

### **First Public Meetings**

Setting the scene	29	The first public meeting	30
His public responds	36	Second public meeting	37
Heading to Wester Ross	39	A few observations	44
Ullapool and Achiltibuie	47	Is it worth the effort?	51
Later public meetings	52		

### **Going to the People**

Setting the scene	57	Visiting institutions	61
Farmers and farms	64	Media publicity	67
Other efforts	72		

## **The Competition**

Setting the scene	74	The Conservative opponent	75
The Labour opponent	79	The SNP opponent	83

## **Charles and the Alliance**

On call	86	With fellow Scottish MPs	87
Alliance campaign strategy	89	Resources	92

## **Eve of Poll**

A merry-go-round of meetings	94	The schedule	95
Nairn's Eve of Poll	96	By contrast, Charles	99

## **Election Day and After**

The process	105	The victory	109
1988 assessment	112	2023 postscript	115

## **Appendix**

**Illustrations** on pages 8 16 35 59 67 68 76 80 Appendix

## Getting Involved

### Setting the scene

It's early May 1987, and Margaret Thatcher has finally announced that the next parliamentary election will be held on June 11. Elections must be held within five years of the last, but the party in power sets the exact date and it had been a guessing game which that would be. Parties take what opportunities they can, and one advantage the party in power in the UK has is to catch its rivals off-guard in its choice of election date. In 1987, barely a month's time was given, promising hectic weeks for party leaders and candidates for the 650 seats in the House of Commons. Thatcher's choice of when to call the 1983 election was seen as taking advantage of her improved popularity due to revived economic growth and to winning the Falklands War, and it would end up netting Conservatives more seats than at any time since 1945. Would 1987 repeat her success?

Parties on the political right in Germany, France, Italy and the UK had been twice as successful at winning elections in the 40 years after 1945 than those on the political left. That suggested Conservatives had a structural advantage. Yet voters in democracies tire of politicians, and like them less and less with each year they remain in office. So would there be a change – or more Thatcher? Many voters saw her as uncaring, abrasive, too focused on too few groups in the population. The Alliance, a new force, was a strong challenger, and opinion polls in 1985 and 1986 had shown it considerably more popular than Labour. Would the 1987 election therefore change the face of national politics in a manner not seen since the 1920s when the Labour Party replaced the Liberals?

The Alliance was born of internal differences in the leadership of the Labour Party that pitted militants on the left against centrist moderates. A number of the latter, including David Owen and Roy Jenkins, were so exasperated that they left Labour in 1981 to create the Social Democratic Party (SDP). That same year, the SDP forged an electoral partnership, called the Alliance, with the Liberal Party. In the 1983 election, the SDP would attract 3.5 million, Liberals 4.3 million, voters. This 11% and 14% meant the Alliance's 25% was almost as great as Labour's 28%, raising the real prospect of breaking the long alternation in power of Labour and Conservatives (Tories). The Alliance itself felt it was an electoral alternative that more accurately reflected the middle-of-the-road orientation of many UK voters.

Yet though the Alliance was popular, its supporters were scattered throughout the UK. Given the first-past-the-post electoral system which favored the concentration of voters in a given constituency (electoral district), the Alliance was able to win only 23 seats – 6 SDP and 17 Liberal – in 1983. Conservative voters were far more geographically concentrated, so while they had only 42% of the votes, they would win 397 of the seats in the House of Commons, or 61%.

The 1987 election would test whether the Alliance, with its attractive leaders, could transform their message of opposing 'politics as usual,' and Thatcher in particular, into actual clout in Parliament. It would also test how convincing the Alliance would be in arguing that the electoral system in the UK should be based on proportional representation.

## The personable politician

Through happenstance in 1983, I became acquainted with a young Scot, Charles Kennedy, then on a Fulbright to study Speech Communication at Indiana University in Bloomington. After he returned home to Scotland that year, and to everyone's surprise, including Charles's, he was elected at age 23 into Parliament. He was one of only six to represent the SDP. While this led to interviews Charles came to dread because they all started with the question "and how does it feel to be the youngest MP?" his win was a sensation for quite another reason. Charles had defeated Hamish Gray, a Conservative, at the time of the election the junior Secretary for Energy. By winning his seat, Charles was one of only two MPs to defeat a seated government minister that year. The drama of the moment was further heightened as his Scottish Highland constituency of Ross, Cromarty, and Skye was one of the last to report in its election results.

I had told Charles that when he stood for election again, I would like to participate in the campaign, so when Thatcher announced the date, I called him up. His invitation was "the more the merrier." It accurately reflected his cheerful attitude toward the game of politics: anyone he knew who was foolish enough to *want* to help out was welcome to do so. I had never participated in a political campaign, and in the few weeks the campaign took, I would act as driver, messenger, envelope stuffer, advisor, event attendee, companion at meals – or in short, as a participant-observer in this all-important political ritual.

Charles came from Fort William, a small town on the west coast of Scotland, and for some reason his mother did not entirely understand, as she told me, had

the gift of gab from a very early age. In high school, his debating talents won him public speaking competitions, and at Glasgow University, he studied English, then politics and philosophy. After graduation, he worked in Inverness seasonally as a reporter for BBC Highland Radio, and while there, won a Fulbright to Indiana University to both teach and continue his studies. He was known as a silver-tongued bon vivant, often ready with jokes students in his speech and debate classes deeply enjoyed, though he did his best to conceal the 'Champaign Charlie' moniker by which he was known at Glasgow University. His smoking, irregular schedule and general dislike of food – or perhaps more, the time needed to consume it – contributed both to his slight frame and his mother's worries.

### The constituency

Ross, Cromarty and Skye is near the top of Scotland, sandwiched between Caithness and Sutherland, the northernmost mainland constituency, and Inverness, Nairn and Lochaber, the constituency Charles was born in. Of the 650 UK political constituencies in 1983, Ross, Cromarty and Skye had the 17<sup>th</sup> smallest electorate, with only 48,401 voters. Its population had increased by 30% from 1971 to 1981, a result of discovering oil off the eastern Scottish coast, but it also had one of the higher shares of farmers, fishermen and foresters in the UK (9%). Or as Charles liked to put it, "my constituency has at least twice as many sheep as people."

By area, it was the largest constituency in the UK, half the size of New Jersey. It stretched southwest across Scotland from the Isle of Skye on the



Atlantic coast to Portmahomock at the end of a large bay to the northeast called the Cromarty Firth. Most of the population lived along the northern edge of this firth, in towns with wonderful names like Muir of Ord, Strathpeffer, Invergordon, Tain and Dingwall, the main economic and industrial centers. When I first saw that bay, its waters were dotted with oil rigs, a few under construction and soon to be towed out, others rusting as they awaited higher prices for North Sea oil.

The south side of the bay, called the Black Isle, was a fertile expanse dotted with fields of bright yellow rape seed in full bloom. It was a new crop to the area, made possible by European Community subsidies for the oil this plant yields. The Black Isle is a peninsula, and on its other side one finds Inverness. A very small part of it was in the constituency, more for demographic than geographic reasons. The constituency boundary then ran southwest along a fault line which Loch Ness has helped fill. British voters inconsistent in their party preferences are called “floating voters,” and it is one of Charles’s small jokes that with Loch Ness in his constituency, he represents the largest floating voter in the UK. If one continues

down this fault to the west coast, one reaches Charles's hometown of Fort William, though halfway down Loch Ness, the political boundary turns and heads due west, and thus includes the Isle of Skye.

Charles is proud, as his campaign literature emphasizes, that he "hails from a crofting background." His father Ian, a well-known fiddler and crofter, had worked for the Scottish hydroelectric board as a draughtsman. Crofts are small-scale, leased farms frequently filled with sheep. The land does not yield much, so the small communities on the west coast, counted as part of Wester Ross – Gairloch, Ullapool, Kyle of Lochalsh, Plockton, Lochcarron, Achiltibuie – lie widely scattered. Crofters and fisherman in this western part of the constituency are a different breed, as both they and those who live in Easter Ross or near Cromarty Firth will readily tell you. Crofts are scattered, their houses separated by huge expanses of land, and are beaten by the harsh weather coming in from the Atlantic. To compensate, strong family and friendship ties link residents together, and they think little of taking 50 or 60-mile trips to visit one another.

Scots Gaelic is also more widely spoken here. Though Charles comes from the west, he does not himself speak it, and during the campaign this was inadequately compensated for by Charles having Sandra MacDonald, a Gaelic-speaker, as his campaign manager. As Charles told it, an early MP who represented Skye used to hold political meetings where he would launch into a tune in Gaelic, and to make a point, would spend a good part of the meeting leading Gaelic songs rather than discussing politics. Politics on Skye were touchy, for the electoral map had been redrawn in 1983, taking the island away from the

constituency to the immediate south. How would Charles, as a non-Gaelic speaker, respond to demands connected to preserving the language or culture?

Charles did have a magnificent answer, though, in the form of his father, both a Gaelic-speaker and a well-known fiddler. In the 1983 campaign, his father was (ahem...) instrumental in making Charles better known, starting his son's political meetings with a fiddle tune or two, turning to him for his speech, and closing things out with a few more tunes. Charles liked to tell the story of one meeting during that campaign where Ian, after he'd played several tunes, had begun to introduce Charles – only to hear a voice from the back of the hall call out “Och, Ian, we'll vote for your son. Now give us a few more tunes!”

There was also the matter of religion. The Highlands had several groups of what were somewhat disdainfully called “we Frees,” non-conformist Presbyterian members of the Free Church and the United Free Church. Their political sympathies tended towards the Liberal Party, but they were also thought to be rather anti-Catholic. And Charles was Catholic. Campaigning in Skye, a Free Church stronghold, was thus a little delicate. If religion came up, Charles would diplomatically say he attended church regularly – and conveniently omit which church that was. But to most voters, many of them Presbyterian, Charles's religious affiliation had not been an issue in 1983.

## Arrival

Scotland is not doing well, The Economist informs me as I fly towards it on May 16<sup>th</sup>. While unemployment is falling elsewhere in the UK, it continues to rise

in Scotland. Over the last eight years, Scotland has lost one-third of its jobs in manufacturing, with coal, textiles, and shipbuilding, its earlier mainstays, now employing less workers than electronics. The owners of larger enterprises are often not local, so many key employment-related decisions are made in England, increasing the sense in Scotland of not being in charge of one's own affairs. Health and education spending are the highest in the UK, though it is unclear whether this reflects higher costs or the need to catch up.

This is clearly not Maggie Thatcher's upbeat Britain I am heading towards, but an area that has suffered under her market-oriented policies. The UK seems increasingly divided between a prosperous south and an impoverished north, both within England's borders and as contrasted with Scotland. Many older industrialized cities with large working-class populations who traditionally vote Labour dot northern England: Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, Newcastle. The Conservative vote in England is found more often in rural or suburban areas, often middle-class, further south, so the north/south divide is both economic and political. Still, the link between social class and voting behavior had already noticeably weakened by 1987.

Scotland's political geography differed. An industrial, Labour-dominated geographic belt that included Glasgow and Edinburgh ran through the middle of Scotland, bracketed by more rural, generally Conservative-voting, areas both to the north and to the south of it. A long history of independent-mindedness, however, meant it also had constituencies that simply voted against London, choosing other options, including the Scottish Nationalists, whose platform advocating greater self-determination gained (re-)new(-ed) force in the 1970s.

The result? In 1983, three-fourths of the Scots did not vote Conservative. The most recent occasion for outrage was Thatcher's 1986 proposal to levy a "community charge," in effect a head tax. Nearly two-thirds of Scots opposed it.

All this lies ahead of me. When I arrive in London, Charles is in Scotland, and lets me know there has been a hitch in the plans, and the Alliance campaign will be kicked off in Glasgow rather than Edinburgh. Charles was elected chair of the Scottish SDP in 1986, and coordination with other members of the SDP as well as with Scotland's Liberals is proving complicated. As I wait in Charles's apartment, a telephoned request comes from his campaign headquarters, two small rooms off the High Street in Dingwall. British electoral practice includes sealing the offices of Members of Parliament, so if you have not taken your papers and notes with you, you are out of luck. All that is available for the duration of the campaign are personal papers and whatever the party headquarters can provide.

His request is to find a particular passage in Hansard, the official record of parliament, in this case from a speech Charles himself had held. Despite the advances in modern technology – microphones in the House of Commons permit parliamentary debate to be followed via loudspeakers situated throughout the Parliament building – scribes still sit above the House chamber, faithfully recording every word. The introduction of television, while it has been debated, has not been approved at this point and will only be decided after the election.

In the meantime, MPs are not above using Hansard to score minor political points. The inability of Hansard scribes to catch every word, or identify who had just spoken, has led, on occasion, to political embarrassment when the debates

are printed the next day and read by the victims. Despite the wonders worked by the scribes, and the many volumes of Hansard which fill Charles's apartment, the looked-for quote was not to be found: the appropriate volume was in his locked offices in the Houses of Parliament.

### The national campaign launches

It was fortunate I could communicate my lack of success from the candidate's apartment, because this would then be on his private telephone bill and not on the party's. Parliament had determined how much Charles could spend on his campaign – £5,370 – so anything that reduced official campaign expenditures helped. Charles would ultimately report spending £5,004, of which 93% was for printing and stationary. The severe limits on expenditure often meant MPs standing for re-election stockpiled stationary ahead of time, in anticipation of the next electoral campaign. Unlimited expenditures were only possible for a national party, not for individual candidates. American-style mass media exposure also could not be bought. Out of financial necessity, political candidates thus had to tie their campaign message to that of their party.

The Alliance, media-conscious, had wanted to launch its campaign before either Labour or Conservatives did so. But its platform, the election manifesto, wasn't ready. That meant considerable last-minute revisions, lengthy meetings between SDP and Liberal leaders, and rescheduling for everyone. One casualty was the kick-off in Scotland, as it wouldn't do for regional parties to launch their campaigns before the national manifesto was released. The word from Charles

was that the Alliance was going to mask its own disorganization by trying to make their change of dates appear as an effort to grab the headlines.

On May 18, the evening news reports consensus had been reached and the manifesto promulgated. The Alliance's social orientation was alliterative; Caring, Compassionate, Competitive, Community. The parties were committed to fighting crime, improving housing, and providing phone service for the elderly. Its two party leaders, David Owen (SDP) and David Steel (Liberal) – soon dubbed the Two Davids by the press – then took off in their bright yellow “battle buses,” with the first ports of call a home for retarded children, a riot-torn section of London, and a hi-tech firm. Having two leaders had been difficult enough for the Alliance; the campaign would exacerbate the problems in coordinating message and people.

I would learn that watching television was a luxury both candidates and staff had to forego for the duration of the campaign. In following the news, I learned two MPs, one Conservative, one Labour, had resigned and that there was dissension among Conservative Party leaders. Adding uncertainty to the election was also the fact that 89 MPs were ‘standing down,’ the largest group to not seek re-election in 50 years. The Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) were also briefly in the news as they, too, had launched their campaign. Their party platform said: “Play the Scottish Card: it's either a London government ... or a Scottish government ... [which can] build a future which is innovative.” Charles's constituency had more than a few SNP supporters, and he would need to have some answers for those who called for an independent Scotland.

## Joining up

The next morning, on the 7:15 flight to Glasgow, having made the tight connection from central London and been sluiced through the many shuttle service lounges at Heathrow, I sleepily wondered at the color symbolism of the parties. Blue for the Conservatives, red for Labour, yellow for the Alliance, but should it come to a coalition government, what color combination would it be? After 40 years of alternation between blue and red majorities, purple seemed quite unlikely. Green would mean the breakaway Alliance working with the Conservatives, perhaps possible for Liberals but difficult for the SDP – and an independent Green Party had only existed under this name since 1985. The orange of Labour with Alliance was also unlikely, not just because the rise of Labour in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had come at the expense of the Liberals but also because the SDP existed due to the rejection, by key figures, of tendencies within Labour. Any combined color, any coalition, would be difficult.

I finally meet up with Charles at the Scottish SDP office in downtown Glasgow. The campaign is to be launched here by its respective Scottish Alliance leaders, Sir Russell Johnston, Liberal Party MP for Inverness, Nairn, and Lochaber, and Charles for the SDP. Sir Russell, as Charles calls him, is a native of Skye, a genial 54-year-old with a fringe of white hair around his balding pate, and a piercing look which lets you know he is very interested in what you have to say. But he can also be rather distracted. At a meeting in Fort William with his constituents, Charles told me, Sir Russell had searched for a cigarette while contemplating a serious question about unemployment. Then he searched for a light. Having now begun to smoke, he launched into his answer, not noticing that

in the process he had inadvertently also started a fire in the wastebasket at his feet. This rather more riveted the attention of his listeners than Sir Russell's answer that unemployment was, indeed, a difficult and complicated issue.

Sir Russell has a large personal following and has been in Scottish politics so long that he can afford to treat his competition with some disdain. At the bottom of his campaign brochure, in fine print, it read: "This is the eighth election Russell Johnston has fought, including his first in 1964. He now faces his 6<sup>th</sup> Tory candidate, his 7<sup>th</sup> Labour candidate and his 5<sup>th</sup> SNP candidate." Sir Russell has led the Scottish Liberal Party for more than a decade and was knighted in 1985 for his political and public service. Charles's greeting, when he later had occasion to telephone Sir Russell, was: "and how's my favorite Peer of the Realm?" The old fox and the young tyro get along well.

The Glasgow offices are a few upstairs rooms in an old building, one room has ringing telephones and Alliance T-shirts for sale, the campaign is launched in another, the backdrop provided by a folding wall which not only reads well on television but which yesterday's news showed was part of a strategy to provide a unity of image for the Alliance.



Charles Kennedy, David Steel, and Sir Russell Johnston at the start of the Liberal-SDP Alliance conference in Perth in May 1987

## The Scottish campaign begins

Lord George Mackie, President of the Scottish Liberal Party, opens by saying that “we are delighted with our start in Scotland, things look well, the Alliance is working together and the signs in the constituencies are excellent, better than they’ve been for years.” Sir Russell follows, tying the Scottish Alliance manifesto to the national manifesto by asserting that

unemployment is the key issue of the election, and very particularly important in Scotland. It has almost trebled since 1979 . . . I think the fundamental criticism of the Conservative government in these last eight years is the way they have handled the windfall from North Sea oil.

He expounds briefly on how well thought-out the Alliance program for combatting employment is – “it has been costed [projected cost estimated], and it will work and it offers hope” – and closes with a few words on the devolution of power away from London, the need for a Scottish parliament elected through proportional representation, and how little other parties have to offer:

The Tories, for the very first time in my political lifetime, are actually overtly opposed . . . to the idea of a Scottish Parliament, and that one finds extraordinary when one considers that within Scotland the Tories at the best probably represent only a quarter of the electorate. I don’t think the SNP have anything new, different or useful to say in this matter. Sometimes they do quite correctly analyse the problem, but they do not produce the cure.

Charles focuses on social issues:

Scotland has the poorest health record in Europe, one Scot in every seven lives in overcrowded conditions, Scottish schools are suffering from years of neglect . . . and young Scots face some of the worst employment prospects in the Kingdom. The Alliance believes the time has come to end this damning burden of social inequality.

He lists a number of key areas, particularly in housing and NHS funding, where the SDP proposes injecting more money. Both Sir Russell and Charles are well-versed in producing brief, punchy statements that will make the evening news.

The journalists present seem generally sympathetic, neither aggressive nor unpleasant. They give the speakers a chance to explain – or to hoist themselves on their own words. One journalist does want to nail the Alliance on proportional representation, but Sir Russell elegantly sidesteps the jab by noting that this voting system already exists for the European Parliament, and that the chance to introduce it was lost already during Britain’s Common Market referendum in 1975. It was a mistake to not push for it earlier, he says, *en passant* noting that admitting mistakes was not what one heard from other parties. Other questions follow about whether the Alliance believes in denationalizing the steel industry, or whether, as Conservatives claim, introducing a Scottish Assembly will mean more taxes for Scots. The first question asked is the most difficult: how distinctively Scottish are any of the Alliance proposals? “The point that we’re making here,” Charles bravely answers, “is that what we are doing on a UK basis is particularly appropriate to Scottish needs.” It is an evasive answer.

No one is present who might even vaguely be called a member of the interested public. The occasion is for reporters and cameramen, party staff, politicians: the reporters need the politicians for quotes, for newsworthy material, and the politicians depend on the reporters to spread their message to the public. The reporters are soon satisfied – it is early in the day, deadlines not yet urgent – and the press conference is followed by a series of brief filmed or taped interviews remarkable only for the variation in sophistication on the part of the questioners. The point is to supply snippets, pithy or controversial statements that can fit a limited time slot on radio or television, and the politicians oblige by restraining themselves. The only amusing part are the fillers showing the back of a journalists' head and the politician's face, meant to suggest a lively interaction. The reporters actually say things like: "see the back of my head now while you are filming this segment; I realize this is not the most thrilling part, but we must do it and I hope it will end soon . . ."

### A very long first day

In the taxi to the airport, it becomes clear the campaign has gone hi-tech. The Two Davids have staffers who travel on their campaign buses exercising their wizardry with laptop computers and modems connect the Glasgow office with party headquarters in London. Charles has a large mobile phone which goes with him everywhere. It will be one of my occasional duties to carry it about, try to make sure it works, or recharge it from the cigarette lighter in the car. It does not

recharge well, works only near transmitters – which are widely scattered in the Scottish Highlands – and is temperamental about which calls it will let through.

On our flight to Cardiff, in a private plane chartered for this occasion, the engine noise hinders phone use. The plane probably cost around £500, funding for which was provided by David Sainsbury, of the grocery store chain. Charles spends his time onboard manipulating the phone, reading the newspapers he'd bought at the airport, and writing checks to pay off his various bills, a chore he has been neglecting. One of the larger bills to be paid, by no means uncommon among MPs, are parking tickets issued by the City of London.

We arrive in Cardiff at 1 PM, and stumble through the afternoon. We are not picked up as foreseen and are instead driven to the downtown Alliance office in a staffer's private car. Charles, unable to complete a number of calls in the air, spends twenty minutes doing so at the office and then emerges to ask about lunch. Meanwhile, local Alliance staff have been discussing the afternoon schedule. Or rather, all three schedules. Frantic calls are made to try to straighten out the confusion, and lunch has been forgotten. After some dithering, the bar in the hotel where a later press conference is to be held appears the only option. We arrive two minutes before the kitchen closes for the afternoon: the meal is terrible, if hot, and washed down with good beer.

The press conference, this time on health and social security, starts at 2:30. Three politicians face six journalists, and play a little game where the politicians state positions and the reporters ask loaded questions. The reporters are a bit baffled, as the Two Davids had just held a highly successful rally in Cardiff the

night before. What exactly was Charles supposed to add to this? The London Alliance office, Charles tells me in some exasperation as we leave, is following a strategy of having an Alliance spokesman in every part of the country, so he had had to quickly, and expensively, get from Scotland to Wales.

We are whisked off to an old age home right after the press conference. There Charles engages in some political bantering with its residents over issues that he himself admits are too complicated to explain in ten minutes, and then we tear off to a children's ENT hospital. For funding reasons, the hospital had recently had to close on weekends; its director, remarkably cheerfully, explains this hadn't been to their detriment at all but had made them more efficient.

By 4:30, we are taken back to the airport at Cardiff, to catch a plane to Gatwick at 5. We had interacted with a number of local candidates, some good, others garrulous or not quite up to campaigning. We wondered: was the Alliance attractive enough to field quality candidates? Despite recharging the mobile phone at Cardiff, it continues to work only intermittently.

The evening sky over southern England is pretty when we land at Gatwick around 6. We are taken no more than 50 feet in a Jeep to a car with a driver, and we relax gratefully into its plush seats. We have no idea where we are now headed, as all was arranged by the London Alliance headquarters. The driver, who works for the BBC, informs us we are heading for Horsham, a suburb known for its fine private school, but does not know what kind of BBC program Charles will be appearing on. We relax further into the seats.

We arrive at the correct building by 7:30, having identified it by the BBC truck outside, and are rapidly steered to a back room. Here, at least, someone has thought to worry about dinner, and we begin with a prawn appetizer. There is much banter among those present, including the program moderator, the various pupils who will be asking questions during the program, and the other panellists. Much to my surprise, they include “Red” Ken Livingston, formerly of the Greater London Council, and Sir Kenneth Clark, Thatcher’s Cabinet Minister for Youth Affairs. The three panellists periodically vanish from the room to have their television make-up put on.

At 8:15, in the Arts Theatre, made to look somewhat like Shakespeare’s Globe, “The South Decides” debate begins; it will be broadcast on BBC South. It’s about manifestos and platforms, and is a ‘party political debate’ as the British call it. It looks and sounds much like the ads for political parties now being televised. The debate pretends to hear spontaneous questions from the young audience, but the questions were all planted, the pupils primed. Some care was taken to show an audience balanced between Labour, Alliance, and Tory parties, and both audience and panellists are remarkably well-mannered and civil with one another.

Red Ken Livingston makes a number of pointed comments, and is clearly popular, but is far less strident than I expected, or than he has been in the past. Actually, he is quite charming, which Charles afterwards says of course he has to be, as he is running for a seat in Parliament. Once Thatcher destroyed the power of the Greater London Council, it had been unclear what Red Ken would do next. As it turned out, he would be elected to parliament in 1987.

The debate is over by 9:00, we all have a glass of wine on the house, and then have to leave for Euston Station to catch the night train to Inverness. The car ride into London is fast, time starts running short, and we arrive at the station by 10:26, just in time to catch the 10:30 train. Fortunately, we already have tickets. Before we go to sleep, we mull over the day, talk over how good the debate was, discuss politics and campaign plans, and more politics, and polish off a small bottle of Glenfiddich to celebrate the kick-off. Given that the day had taken me north from London to Glasgow, south to Cardiff, east to Gatwick and Horsham, north to London, and I was now headed back up to Scotland – more than 1500 miles in all – I wondered whether the rest of the campaign was going to be like this.

### Settling into campaigning

As we approach Inverness, we pass by lush hills dotted with sheep, and on this cold, overcast morning, it's clear we are a long way from urban England. We pick up the newspapers at the train station, locate Charles's racy red Toyota, and head over the Moray Firth and the Black Isle, along increasingly narrow roads, to Strathpeffer, a half-hour away. This Victorian spa town is enjoying a renaissance, and its many hotels seem capable of swallowing endless buses of middle-aged tourists visiting the Highlands. We're staying at the Strathpeffer Hotel, run by Mr. Terry Kennedy – no relation – a white-haired pipe-smoker of definite opinions. When first elected, Charles had rented an apartment across the road, but due to his repeated need to be in London and the expense of maintaining an apartment

in Strathpeffer on his £18,500 MP salary, it made more sense to him to stay at this hotel when he was returned to see his constituents.

The hotel Kennedys are up in their apartment, watching the telly and complaining about politics, and life in general, but are extremely hospitable and treat Charles like a member of the family, fix up food right away and get us quickly to our rooms. We are grateful, eat, have a bath, and relax a bit before heading off to headquarters, the Alliance campaign office in nearby Dingwall. It is in an alley off the High Street, at once accessible yet hidden, and consists of a large work room with a central table, smaller desks with phones and a computer, a sink in a corner, and a separate office for Sandra McDonald, Charles's campaign agent.

Sandra masterminded Charles's last campaign, and she and her husband David, a school principal, are mainstays of the local Liberal Party. John Munro, the head of the local SDP, lives on the west coast of Scotland, but his daughter works for Charles. These two women are the only full-time campaign workers, the Alliance embodied in the office, as it were. In London, two other women work for Charles's campaign and are periodically in Scotland, so locals slyly refer to the four collectively as Charlie's Angels.

Charles's London solicitor and local volunteers in various communities in the constituency, many of them teachers like Sandra and David, will show up at various times in the Dingwall office to help out. All have other commitments, so it is a persistent logistical headache to organize travel and accommodation for those involved in the campaign. In the middle of another crisis in shuffling people around, Sandra, in her quiet and determined way, said she was glad she didn't

have to do this job *all* the time. The roles are clear: she holds down the fort in Dingwall, coordinating, and Charles goes out and performs.

### Getting the word out

The computer in the office was meant, in part, to make mailing campaign literature easier. Charles had wanted to send out a “letter to young voters,” for example, and the computer was to print out the 2,000 or so address labels. After much fiddling, plus a number of visits from computer technicians, it transpired that the computer program itself had a glitch and only about 700 of these addresses ended up being printed. The remaining 1,300 envelopes had to be addressed by hand, a minor chore compared with the big mailing.

By law, Charles was entitled to one free mailing to his constituents. It included a glossy brochure with six pictures of Charles, a letter to the voters, a description of Alliance policies, a brief biography, and a description of all Charles had done for his constituents in the previous four years, all framed in bright yellow Alliance colors. Unlike in 1983, this time the campaign material was to be sent to every one of the constituency’s nearly 53,000 registered voters.

The significance of such a mailing did not strike me at first. But as volunteers dropped by to pick up envelopes, or bring back those they had addressed, it became clear that every single one of these 53,000 envelopes was being addressed by hand. Along with organizing advertising, arranging Charles’s schedule and keeping track of expenditures, it was one of Sandra’s tasks to coordinate the substantial effort needed to get out this many pieces of mail.

Fortunately, candidates had access to the voter rolls, and the accuracy of the addresses on the rolls was quite high. Unfortunately, much of the addressing was done by volunteers who lived in the communities to which this mail was being sent, so addressors might omit or add names based on what they knew about their neighbors' whereabouts. That rather complicated comparing envelope addresses with voter roll addresses. When more elderly family members of campaign volunteers were enlisted, the problems increased, as they did not always entirely understand what they were to do. Volunteers would also bring back envelopes out of alphabetical order, requiring an additional sorting step, or might overlook addresses. Those working in the campaign office had to fill in such gaps using a new envelope, and sometimes envelopes had scrambled names and addresses, so these too had to be re-addressed. Many hours went into such tasks, with pressure added by the Post Office's deadline for receiving these campaign mailings. No effort was spared, though: Charles even sent off a letter addressed to the 12 voters on Soay, a small island off the west coast.

There was no lack of mail in the office otherwise, as constituents continued to write their MP about their issues. This was a problem, for though Charles wanted to continue his work on their behalf, during the campaign itself he was no longer officially their Member of Parliament but only a "prospective parliamentary candidate" without MP privileges. Even his campaign stationary reflected his provisional status, though this distinction was lost on most constituents. A few wrote to complain that Charles had done nothing for them since their last inquiry, and they received especially rapid answers during the campaign. But most mail was mundane. A hotel owner complained that the hotel water had suddenly

turned brown: couldn't Charles do something about it? A pensioner complained his check was late. A group of farmers wanted to know about new regulations.

At best, as he did while serving as an MP, Charles could only pass on the query to the relevant authorities and try to exert pressure on them to act. There was an expectation that the MP could find a solution to nearly any issue. What, exactly, a group of students at a local school thought Charles could do about the appalling treatment of animals in South Korea was a little beyond any of us in the office. Charles's answered that their concerns would be expressed to the proper authorities, and their petition to take action was duly forwarded.

### The local press

When he was at campaign headquarters in Dingwall in the morning, Charles always began with a stack of newspapers he, or others, had bought. The Ross-shire Journal was the local paper. Its major function was well described by its subtitle: The General Advertiser for the Northern Counties. It appeared every Thursday and was widely read for its public notices, including those related to elections. The Inverness Courier played a similar role further south and was of interest partly for its editorials – Inverness was by far the largest community in the area – but also because a small part of it was in Charles's constituency. Charles also paid attention to the strident West Highland Free Press, which covered Skye, Wester Ross, and the Western Isles. He would scan The Herald (Glasgow), The Scotsman (Edinburgh), and The Press and Journal (Aberdeen) to see how major

Scottish papers reported on the issues and the campaign. Demands of his local campaign precluded spending much time reading London newspapers.

Over the weekend, Charles had made something of a splash on television, as reported in a May 19 editorial in the *Inverness Courier*:

. . . the general election has legally started. For the next three weeks manifestoes, posters, promises, canvassers, and radio and television programmes ad nauseam, are going to bedevil the electorate. Indeed, one of the candidates for Ross, Cromarty and Skye, none other than the recent SDP MP Charles Kennedy, was forthright enough to say, in a week-end television discussion, and to the horror of the representatives of the three other parties, that he expected after “wall-to-wall television,” people would be far too bored to go out and vote. He is right, of course . . .

Charles was pleased by the evident support for his sentiment, and still more by the additional exposure it gave him: coverage, good or bad, meant your name was in the news. It was a droll remark that sounded unpremeditated, the kind that showed Charles thought like his constituents. Yet wouldn't saying the election would be boring keep your own supporters from the polls?

Charles spent most of the first day writing his campaign speech, polishing and repolishing it. He hadn't had time until now to organize his thoughts, and his composition was aided by numerous cigarettes and endless Cokes. It was also interrupted by phone calls, repeated consultations with Sandra about scheduling, letters he needed to sign as candidate, and issues connected to the mass mailing. There was no time to enjoy the fine, sunny day outside.

## First Public Meetings

### Setting the scene

The heart of the campaign is the “public meeting,” occasions where the candidates go to communities in their constituencies, give a speech, and answer questions from local residents. It’s the electoral tradition to hold these meetings, and given that candidates cannot advertise for themselves on radio or TV, as well as their very constrained budget, it’s also the most visible way to get your message out. With 53,000 potential voters and the brevity of the campaign, most larger towns could be visited – and politically folly to ignore certain villages.

On most days of the campaign, Charles held three (or even four) public meetings, usually in the evenings. Distances in the Highlands made it imperative for the itinerary to be carefully planned so that meetings could be held in nearby towns, far easier to do in Easter than in Wester Ross.

It was one of Charles’s repeated themes that he was getting out to the voters earlier and holding more public meetings than any other candidate. This was no idle boast: in 18 days of active campaigning, Charles would hold 45 public meetings. Both Labour and SNP candidates would hold only half as many. The Conservative candidate managed only a meagre seven, and because the Ross-shire Journal publishes the schedule of each candidate, it was clear that during 11 of the 18 days, the Conservative candidate held no public meetings at all (for the details, see the Appendix).

For all candidates, though, the sheer size of the constituency necessitated repeated travel from Wester Ross, on the Atlantic coast, to Easter Ross, on the

North Sea coast. It was at least an 80-mile trip, one way, often on narrow roads, to get from one side of Scotland to the other, and in one of our dashes to make it on time to the next public meeting, we were caught in a speed trap. Fortunately, the policemen were rather tickled to have stopped the MP, or more properly, the prospective parliamentary candidate for the SDP, and settled for giving the American driver of the car a scolding rather than a speeding ticket...

### The first public meeting

Most public meetings were held in village halls or schools; by law, schools had to provide rooms in which such political meetings could be held. The first public meeting is to be held in Cromarty, a village at the tip of the Black Isle on the east side of the constituency. But when we get there, no one seemed to know where the key to open the hall was. Twenty do then attend, and Charles has his first opportunity to try out the speech he will repeat, with mind-numbing frequency, in the next weeks.

He begins by briefly bemoaning the lack of televised coverage in the House of Commons, though anyone “can see what goes on in the unelected, unrepresentative House of Lords.” He then quickly moves on to two Alliance themes of particular relevance to Scotland: proportional representation and the decentralization of power. For many years, the first-past-the-post, plurality electoral system was regarded as beneficial, as it ordinarily led to one party having an adequate majority. It also meant a seat might be won by a margin of only a few hundred votes, and in fact, most MPs won less than half the votes cast.

This was something of a paradox, for in absolute terms, though most MPs claimed to speak for everyone in their districts, only a minority of their constituents had actually voted for them. Charles was no exception. His margin of victory in 1983 was only 1,704 votes more than the votes cast for Hamish Gray, the incumbent and his Conservative opponent. Specifically, only 38.5% of the 35,036 who had voted in 1983 had actually voted for Charles.

This many 'wasted votes' had led, in the previous decade, to repeated calls to introduce a proportional representation system. In Cromarty, Charles said:

It is wrong, for example, in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland that thousands of people who vote Labour throughout the length and breadth of this area don't see the return of even one elected member of Parliament. It's wrong in the city of Glasgow that thousands of people who vote Conservative now don't have one Conservative Member of Parliament for that great city. And it goes on: it is unfairness built into the system, and unrepresentativeness as well as ineffectiveness in political decision-making which results from it.

It sounded wonderfully magnanimous, as though Labour and Conservative voters also would profit from proportional representation. But it was also disingenuous.

By one calculation, had proportional representation been used in 1983, both Conservatives and Labour would have received, respectively, 17% and 44% less seats than they actually did. The Alliance, on the other hand, would have won 87% more. Since the existing plurality system had worked so much to benefit the Conservative Party in 1983, it was hardly surprising they had little interest in altering that system. Inconveniently for the Alliance, the Liberal Party had not previously demanded proportional representation, including when it had more

clout in the mid-1970s. It wouldn't even help the SNP but would instead result in Scotland having 20 MPs *less* in the House of Commons than before.

Charles's second major theme, decentralization, had become an issue in the 1970s during James Callaghan's Labour government, with a referendum held in 1979 about establishing a separate Scottish Assembly. That proposed Assembly would have had quite limited powers, and while a small majority favored the idea, only a third of the registered voters participated. It thus failed to meet the 40% participation rate for this referendum to be valid. Scots had continued to chafe at being governed from London, a sentiment Charles spoke to:

To begin to decentralize power out of Whitehall and out of the southeast of England, which is not the most representative part of the country, and certainly not very much in touch with an awful lot of attitudes in Scotland as a whole and indeed in the Highlands of Scotland in particular. And that means we want to take away some of the great power which state departments enjoy and decentralize it through, in particular, a Scottish parliament which would sit in Edinburgh and which again would be elected by proportional representation so that no one party and no one region could dominate in decision-making as it affects Scotland.

Other parties also favored some form of decentralization; the Alliance attempted to steer a middle course between SNP separatism and Labour's power devolution. But it was interesting that Charles's next point was to argue for reforming local government by creating "single-tier, multipurpose, local authorities" (reducing overlapping jurisdictions of boards and councils) though, since that seemed to mean local efforts to centralize administration and implementation were fine.

Charles next addressed the economy, a complicated issue in what had become an oil-dependent Scotland. Since the early 1960s, it had been known there was oil under the North Sea, but it would only begin being commercially exploited on a larger scale in response to the energy crisis a decade later. An intense scramble to expand alternate sources, including from the North Sea, set in by the late 1970s, with oil prices peaking in 1981.

By the time Charles took to the campaign trail in 1987, the boom in oil production in his constituency, centered in Inverness, had passed. The global price for oil in 1987 was only a third of what it had been in 1981. Despite this price slump, Charles suggested oil companies might be given incentives to continue expanding. It was an argument particularly relevant in Cromarty, which lay just across the Firth from Highland Fabricators, an oil platform construction company where many Black Isle residents worked. "If you look at Scottish unemployment," Charles noted, "between a third and half of those out of work in Scotland last time they were in employment were in some kind of construction or construction-related activity." Charles was suggesting one continue building oil rigs, anticipating a renewed rise in oil prices, though another idea was to put those skilled in construction to work at building public housing or roads. That, he added, would be a far better use of the 23 million pounds being spent annually on unemployment and other benefits in the constituency.

The final point Charles raised was about defence. Nationally, the Alliance did not agree with the Labour Party, which in 1982 and 1986 had called for removing cruise missiles and scrapping the aging, submarine-based Polaris missile system. The Alliance did not want to replace it with the newer, more powerful

Trident missile system, as Thatcher wished. That was expensive and escalated the nuclear arms race, and would make the UK even more dependent on American technology than it already was; instead, the Alliance wanted to update Polaris.

This might seem rather distant from Scottish voters' concerns were it not for Thatcher's plan to station upgraded, thermonuclear-tipped Trident missiles at the Faslane Naval Base. This base, originally a WWII installation, was located on the west coast of Scotland only an hour or so from Glasgow by car. When the U.S. set up a submarine base near there in 1960, there had already been protests, and 1982 saw the Faslane Peace Camp established: it would become a very long-lived institution for a variety of protesters. Faslane lay south of Charles's constituency.

Scots were conflicted, NIMBY sentiment competing with a perceived need for a strong national defence. Various Scottish politicians had used the naval base as a backdrop for political appearances, and the SNP was not alone in Scotland in opposing the Trident upgrade. Part of the Alliance's efforts to chart a middle course led Charles to try to position himself, and the Alliance, so as not to alienate either supporters of strong defense or opponents of Trident:

On changing our political system, on increasing and encouraging efforts to create jobs and reduce unemployment and revive British industry, and on maintaining a sensible defense policy for this country whilst being sincere about disarmament, I think that the Alliance is most in tune with what British public opinion wants.

Charles closed by making a point found in many U.S. political science textbooks about the contrasting roles politicians play. On the one hand, politicians need to consider and vote in a manner that best serves the interests of

the country, acting as a trustee of the whole, even when their own constituents might not see it that way or disagree over what those interests are. That role is in contrast or even conflict with the ‘delegate,’ who has been sent to the national legislature to vote in the manner most of his or her constituents desire:

If I am returned as your Member of Parliament on June the 11<sup>th</sup>, I would simply repeat the two promises that I made at the last election. And I think that at the end of the day in politics – and I don’t care which party it is, including my own – there are only two promises you *can* make. One is that you’ll try your best, which won’t always be good enough for everybody, indeed sometimes it won’t even be good enough for the majority, and secondly, I’ll put the interests of the constituency first. I’ve tried to do that over the past four years, and if you do me the privilege of giving me your support in sufficient numbers for me to be returned on June the 11<sup>th</sup>, I shall certainly make those my twin priorities for the next Parliament.



## His public responds

Because Charles makes a point that he campaigns to hear what his constituents have to tell, or ask, him, he always left as much time as possible to answer questions. His audience is not a bit shy. Though we are in small-town northern Scotland, the questions run the gamut from very local to international.

Two gentlemen want to know what can be done about the loss of small shops in the community and the growing concentration of businesses in Inverness. Another asks about Labour Leader Neil Kinnock's promise of increased pensions and Christmas bonuses, and whether the Alliance will promise the same. Charles answers this last by joking that Alliance promises are, of course, a bit more generous than those of the Labour Party – and that everyone, his own SDP party included, makes campaign promises like this! He earns hearty laughter for his forthrightness.

The noisy, despicable behavior of MPs during debates in the House of Commons comes up. Charles replies by saying that this is behavior “which I can assure you the Honorable Member from Ross, Cromarty and Skye has never indulged in!” and then reiterates his wall-to-wall television remark. No one seems to notice the contradiction of first calling for more TV coverage of Commons debates yet then disparaging ‘wall-to-wall’ television coverage of the campaign.

The fallout from a question about nuclear disarmament is a little more troubling. Answering a question about how strong a negotiating position Britain can really have in NATO, or in dealing with either the US or the USSR, Charles says that Britain indeed has a strong position. He adds: “we met [then Soviet Foreign

Minister] Shevardnadze about eight months ago when he was in London,” who had said the Soviets were *happy* to have the uncertainty of dealing not just with American but also with British and French missiles. It was problematic for a negotiator like Shevardnadze to encounter positions that were too fixed. Easier to have uncertainty – one could then “start with a fist and end with a handshake.”

It sounds like a plausible explanation for shifts in Soviet orientations under Gorbachev. As we drive to North Kessock, and the next meeting that night, I ask Charles about this. He tells me it isn't true. He has never met Shevardnadze, and the claim that the statement about the fist turning to a handshake came from him was similarly untrue. Later, Charles admits he invented the story precisely because the good people of Cromarty wouldn't know whether he had met Shevardnadze or not; voters are credulous, particularly if you put on a convincing show. The next day, Charles tells me it was actually the Two Davids who met Shevardnadze and that the fist-into-handshake image came from an American textbook on negotiation. Perhaps due to my repeated questioning, with its implication there is something not quite right about making a blatantly untrue claim during campaign appearances, or perhaps due to feeling a little guilty at fooling those who trust him, Charles soon ceases repeating this tale.

### Second public meeting

We stop at the Kessock Hotel for a pint of beer before the next meeting, and have our first encounter with an aggrieved constituent, the hotel owner. Why aren't the signs on the motorway advertising the hotel's location larger, more

visible? Why have the bathrooms across the street been closed? Everyone comes into the hotel to use the facilities instead! There aren't any public telephones available, so people also come in the hotel to use its telephones, not stay or eat! I wonder that he complains both – for lack of good signage – about not having enough people come to his hotel, yet also complain about too many coming into his hotel from across the street. Yet it is clear he feels it is the MP's duty to rectify the situation. As if to soften his tirade, the owner then pulls us into the back room, first to admire his son's snooker trophies, and then to admire his photograph of the bottle-nosed dolphins who came into the Moray Firth his hotel overlooks. We are released, finally, and can go back to the bar to finish our beers. Despite his frustrations, the owner is clearly tickled when Charles signs the hotel's guestbook.

As before, we cannot locate the key to the hall down the road. Once we finally do, the audience of about 15, as at Cromarty, is respectful, quiet, and supportive. Charles strongly articulates the 'wanting to hear from my constituents' theme:

Over the past four years, I've tried as best I can to get round this entire constituency, visit, hold surgeries and perhaps most importantly in this job, simply listen to what people are saying, because it *has* struck me over the past four years that there's a great deal of lecturing in British politics – and my party leaders are as prone to do it as the other party leaders are – but there's not always as much listening to what people are actually saying and thinking, and I feel that that's very important. And that's why we're really starting off in *this* constituency – I believe the first campaign to take to the road – and I suspect as was the case

last time, we'll probably – at least I hope we will! – end up holding more public meetings than anybody else because I think it's important that candidates should not just go around telling people what *they* think – although that's important so that you know where we stand – but they should make themselves available to hear what you think, and to answer questions about what you think the priorities and issues are.

Charles also emphasizes his own political impotence. “Once a month, as a Scottish MP, I've had the opportunity to question one Scottish Office Minister on one issue affecting this constituency – and that's it for another month.” This rolls out as an indictment of how poorly the Scots are treated by the English, a sentiment shared by many Scots and one they like to hear, even if they won't vote for the SNP. Charles then turns this lack of voice into an appeal for why a Scottish Parliament elected by proportional representation is “urgently needed.”

Charles's formulation lets him avoid what would be a very American response. If you are so ineffective as a representative, so unable to get my local concerns aired in London, why should I vote for you? Still, there is a recognition that some aspects of the system limit political effectiveness, aspects which have their historical roots and that cannot be readily changed. There is a palpable sense at this meeting, despite the mildly critical tone of some of the questions, that this is our MP speaking, and he is doing what he can for us.

### Heading to Wester Ross

The next day, Thursday, before we leave for meetings on the west coast, Sandra shows off one woman's donation to the Alliance campaign: 36 eggs from

her farm. They are to be sold and the profits used for the party. Today, Charles and I are accompanied by Tim Jackson, a young reporter for The Economist who wants to see what rural campaigning in Scotland is like:

Tim: I've never really found out how much of it [the campaign] is a matter of adrenalin and how much [there is a sense of] 'Oh God – three weeks of Hell and then I'll be back in the House.'

Charles: Well, I think there's a certain feeling particularly in this kind of constituency where, really starting today, my feet will hardly touch the ground for the next three weeks . . .

Tim: I was hoping to ask you lots of heavy questions about the SNP – and I'd like to get a flavour of local campaigning.

Charles: Sure. Well, we got everything last night [at public meetings in Cromarty and North Kessock], from international nuclear disarmament through to the dredging of the local firth and the effect it would have on the seafront of the local community.

Tim: What do most people in your constituency do? Is there a lot of agriculture?

Charles: A fair amount, actually. I mean, it's declined as a proportion of total activity and total employment. It's still of importance. Now where were those rosettes? I may leap out enroute if we see interesting things. . .

*We soon halt at an inn to greet the owners.*

Tim: Do you mind if I follow?

Charles: Not at all. Feel free.

Tim: Is it OK to carry civilians around with you?

John: He's carrying me around with him!

Tim: I assumed you were wearing a rosette.

John: No, I'm incognito...

Charles: John's just over on holiday, so he's just helping.

John: Yes, I regard this as relaxation . . .

Charles: Some way to spend a holiday, I think!

*We return to the car.*

John: How would you characterize your constituents politically?

Charles: I think the Highlands are essentially moderate in their outlook, but with a kind of radical tinge, so historically, liberalism has always enjoyed a fair amount of bedrock support here. And before that, the crofting reform movement got MPs elected. There's always been a non-establishment feel to it, largely because it's obviously so removed from the mainstream of activity.

Tim: The last time I was up here, I had lunch with Cameron Christy. He said to me that he thought the SDP was seen as – the SDP but not the Liberals – were seen as carpetbaggers. And that was one of the problems you had to counteract. I mean, clearly you have an advantage in not being . . .

Charles: English! The fact that I'm a Highlander is extremely important.

Tim: Are all the other candidates in your constituency?

Charles: The Labour candidate is. The SNP candidate I think originally is from somewhere else, I'm not sure where, although he's been up here for a fair while. The Conservative – I don't really know what you'd class him as. He's got a rather Oxbridge accent, you know.

Tim: But he's running second, isn't he?

Charles: Uh-huh, yeah, on the basis of the last election, he's in second place.

Tim: But you're expecting him – but I mean considering how badly the Tories are doing in Scotland, you're not expecting that much from him, I assume.

Charles: Well, difficult to know at this stage. I wouldn't have thought so, no, I mean it's difficult to see circumstances, at the moment anyway, in which there's going to be any great surge to the government, in the Highlands particularly. They [the Tory government] haven't exactly covered themselves in glory – putting it at its most charitable! And obviously, he's not the Conservative [from the] last time; he was the sitting MP. Although he's starting from this 11,000 votes or whatever it was last time, he, in a sense, is starting from scratch as a new candidate.

Tim: I thought you defeated a Tory in '83 who went to the House of Lords.

Charles: That's right, yes.

*There is a longer pause.*

Tim: I was told by somebody who works for David Owen that Roy Jenkins is in quite severe danger of losing his seat.

Charles: I don't think so personally myself. I think Roy's majority will go up.

Tim: Really?

Charles: I've always thought that, yes.

Tim: Well, I was amazed to hear it.

Charles: I think his majority will go up.

Tim: Do you know Alex Demott? It was him that said that – I was astonished.

Charles: I'm not sure how much they know what's actually going on in Glasgow. I doubt . . . not a great deal, actually.

Tim: I shouldn't think it would be polite to point that out.

Charles: No, no. I like Alex very much; he's a very nice guy. But I suspect that's a misreading – I would have thought Roy would be back.

Tim: I almost spent a summer working for David Owen when I was at university.

Charles: You did or you didn't?

Tim: I didn't.

Charles: Well that could be one of the best things that'd happened to you!

Tim: Not doing it?

Charles: He's a fairly hard taskmaster, from what I can gather.

Tim: Well actually what stopped me doing it was that I wrote to him in the middle of my second year saying that I would, that I had a summer free, and I was doing politics at university and I wanted to find out what an MP did. If he would, if I could find out what he did, then I'd do some research for him.

Charles: Sounds a fair deal.

Tim: Sounds a fair deal, exactly. And Alex got back to me, I had lunch with him and he say yes, yes, brilliant idea, and I talked with him on the phone a few more times. And then the message came down from on high, from Maggie Smart, that I could only come if I would do what the person who was working for them at the moment but was about to go was doing. The

guy was a sort of 16-year-old school-leaver who'd been doing photocopying and filing for two-thirds of the day and compiling research briefs for Alex for the other third. And I thought, you know, that it really wasn't worth it. So I said no, and that was that.

*There is another lull in the conversation.*

Tim: I don't know if Mary Anne told you, that's one of the funny things about The Economist that . . .

Charles: . . .it's full of all these SDP people . . .

Tim: . . .that it's full of all these . . .

Charles: . . .writing Tory stuff!

Tim: . . .SDP people, and the guy I share an office with is going canvassing for Labour next week!

*We stop at a petrol station. It has a small shop with an open window, and the proprietor and his wife are standing there. Charles greets first the man, shaking his hand, then greets the wife, shaking her hand as well.*

Charles: Hello! Charles Kennedy. We're just on our way out, farther west. Hello, how are you? We've got some meetings in Ullapool and Achiltibuie tonight, so . . .

Proprietor: It's not a bad day for meetings, I would think.

Charles: It's lovely, should be nice, eh, out in the west.

Proprietor: Not bad at all.

Charles: How are things? You busy?

Proprietor: Yes, really am quite busy again.

Charles: Aye.

Proprietor: The [bus] tours about, and the regulars . . .

*As we stand talking, a truck driver comes up to us at the open window.*

Driver: Maggie's looking after him!

Charles: Maggie [Thatcher] looks after everybody! Where's home for you?

Driver: Oh, Dingwall. I've seen you last night.

Charles: Oh, aye. We had some meetings on the Black Isle last night.

Driver: Your father plays the fiddle.

Charles: Right.

Driver: I used to work down in Fort William.

Charles: Did you?

Driver: A long time ago.

Charles: Oh, my father will be out on the campaign trail with a fiddle next week as well. He's coming to join us.

Driver: You've no worries up here.

Charles: D'ye think so? We're not taking anything for granted, we're going hard.

Driver: Tories [are] wasting their time.

Charles: Think so?

Driver: Och, no chance.

Charles: Hope you're right, hope you're right.

Driver: The other fellow's no helping.

Charles: Kinnock?

Driver: Aye.

### A few observations

Displeasure with the national government has a long history in the Highlands, and with it, a decided preference to vote for Liberal Party candidates, or to support Scottish independence in one guise or another. The encounter at the petrol station was typical: scorn for both Thatcher and Kinnock, or perhaps better, scorn for whichever party was in power.

From 1945 to 1964, John MacLeod, a Conservative, had represented Ross and Cromarty, until he was replaced by Alasdair Mackenzie, a Liberal. He in turn only lasted one term, replaced in 1970 by Hamish Gray, the Conservative who Charles, representing the SDP, defeated in 1983. In other words, for 32 of the 42 years from 1945 to 1987, the seat was held by Conservatives, so it was all the more remarkable that someone representing a new, center-left party had managed to defeat a Conservative Party incumbent in 1983.

This history can be read less personally. Voters here had elected a Conservative when Labour was in power (1945 to 1951; 1974 to 1979), a Liberal when Labour was in power (1964 to 1970), and then a Social Democrat when the Conservatives were in power. Only half the time in those 42 years had the MP from Ross and Cromarty belonged to the party with the majority in the House of Commons; supporting the underdog seemed to be something of a habit. Yet that, too, is an inadequate explanation.

In the postwar era, and with some frequency, UK candidates had stood for election in constituencies with which they had no previous connection. These 'safe seats' for a given party depended on constituents consistently voting along party, and largely class, lines. You voted for the party, not the man. It mattered somewhat less whether your representative was actually from the area; hence Tim's comment about carpetbagging.

By the mid-1970s, this began to change. Perhaps it was the growing influence of a better-educated middle class. Perhaps there were more media outlets, more coverage of politics. Perhaps there was growing awareness that

what happened outside the country economically and politically directly influenced UK lives. Whatever the cause, it began to be far more acceptable to vote for alternatives to Labour or Conservatives, including supporting older parties (like the Liberals), regional parties (like the SNP or Plaid Cymru), or upstarts (like the SDP or Greens). But Tim's comments also showed how little he knew of local conditions: there was simply no recent history in this electoral constituency of a successful candidate having come from outside. Charles's four predecessors had all been born in the constituency, hence his moderately dismissive comment about his Conservative opponent's Oxbridge accent.

Though he hailed from Ft. William, in a neighboring constituency, Charles was acutely aware of how important it was to be seen as a Highlander and not an outsider. The chance encounter at the petrol station underscored it. That truck driver had worked in Ft. William, knew enough about it to also know of the musical talents of Charles's father, and had even attended Charles's public meeting the night before. In a more urbanized constituency, it might make a difference if a candidate was perceived as politically well-connected and able to get things done in London, and that could compensate in part for that same candidate being less well-connected in the constituency itself. But it was nearly the opposite in Ross, Cromarty, and Skye. Voters in the Highlands cared that their representative knew the district and what moved its voters: that was more important than how well a candidate knew their party's platform. In the Highlands, you voted for the man, not the party – and that man was local.

Still, the Alliance faced a structural issue: voting for it would split opposition to Thatcher, not leaving enough support to win an outright majority. The Liberal-

Labour cooperation of the later 1970s had not ended well; would an Alliance-Labour coalition government do any better? Charles's job was to convince skeptics that a vote for the Alliance was not a wasted vote, but Tim's "I almost worked for David Owen" story also indicated that a resource-poor, small party might well give the impression it was also too weak to win an election.

### Ullapool and Achiltibuie

At Ullapool we go to the house of a local Alliance activist, and are soon guided to the town's new retirement complex, one which provides centralized care as well as independent living arrangements. In an upstairs room, Charles chats with the old ladies sitting there, many of them knitting. He was clearly tickled by one of the oldest residents – she didn't have much patience for any politician, she said, she'd seen too many of them in her lifetime.

The topic of the day was the appalling condition of the adjoining Ladysmith Road: it really needed repaving – older residents were falling down when they tried to cross it and it was a danger to children as well! Besides, the fire department trucks used it, and it simply needed to be in better shape. Why couldn't something be done about that road? Retirement center staff members were incensed as well. Some told Charles, quite directly, that he would get 5 to 10 votes from the staff if he managed to get that road repaired.

Our next stop was the telephone exchange, where the 19 who worked there were about to lose their jobs. New equipment was making them redundant. You could see communications history at the exchange, for two women still worked at

plug boards, switching machines filled the room behind them, and behind that you could dimly see the new bank of fiber optic devices. Ullapool was one of the last phone exchanges to be fully automated, and there was nostalgia for the lost days of a nosy community. In another community the plugs corresponded to where telephones, and thus houses, were located. As a result, the phone operators always knew where the local doctor was going when he went on his house calls.

Then we did the shops. What a capacity for small talk and endless pleasantries one needs as a politician! We go from store to store, talking politics, asking how the business is faring or what plagues the town right now. The appalling state of the Ladysmith Road comes up more than once. The candidate needs to be seen in town if he expects to have an audience in the evening. That includes places where many come to, such as to the fishing office at the docks. It's also an excellent way to get a quick sense of what people in Ullapool are thinking. Though he could give examples drawn from each community Charles canvasses, he is careful in his speeches and answers not to use what he learns at any specific community, instead generalizing about the Highlands or the constituency as a whole. He knows how quickly news – or a flippant comment – can spread in small places.

Dinner is at a local schoolteacher's house: our host is a local Alliance organizer. It's a much-needed repast and rest after the long hours of campaigning. The proffered beverage, the only liquid available on the table, is whisky. This occurs several times during the campaign, and I'm a bit taken aback this first time, not least because I'm the driver. We head off, and it is fortunate the road has only one lane, with turnouts, and not two. Otherwise I'd have to

concentrate to stay on what was, for me, the wrong side of the road. We arrive late at Achiltibuie, a small fishing village on the coast.

The meeting is in a schoolroom at the local elementary school. “Tone pictures,” as they are labelled, adorn the walls, many of which seem to be of the Summer Isles, mounds in the water one can dimly make out in the school’s windows through a curtain of rain. The blackboard still holds evidence of the days’ lesson. It might have been about geography or non-Scottish animals, but it seemed to be based more on what the children had picked up from Rudyard Kipling: Africa, Limpopo, Kolokola Bird, baboon, giraffe, hippopotamus.

Charles uses our late arrival as a pretext to emphasize that “we may well be the only campaign that holds a meeting in Achiltibuie,” and that with so many meetings, it is inevitable some will begin late. As at North Kessock, he again emphasizes political reform:

Four years ago, I stood [for office] on a platform which involved changing the voting system, decentralizing power and so on, and four years later, I have to say – still standing on that same platform – that having worked now in Parliament for four years, I’m more convinced than I was four years ago of the need for those kinds of changes.

It's an admission he’s been unable to change a system he feels needs to change. At another level, it’s an appeal he will keep trying, a failure wrapped in a promise. His listeners nod, well aware they are in a political system which likes to maintain its traditions and resists change.

After his talk, he takes questions. “I have no bullet-proof vest,” he jests, before subjecting himself to his constituents’ concerns. The first is about the lack of clarity about an issue of great concern in Scotland, proposed changes to “ratings,” the local tax system.

First of all, don’t feel ashamed about not understanding it – the government doesn’t understand it either! We’re all rather in the dark because it’s a bad piece of legislation, it’s panic legislation, which is always the wrong kind of law to draw up, and it’s not well thought out. What it will do, basically, is get rid of the present rating system, which is unjust and unfair and stacked full of anomalies – nobody disagrees about that – and will replace it with another system which is also going to be unfair, unjust and stacked with anomalies . . .

A “community charge” is to replace it, and Thatcher herself, Charles notes, had called it a poll tax, something not seen in western democracies “for hundreds and hundreds of years.” Charles calls the whole scheme “indefensible” and “a regressive tax,” and suggests having a local income tax as an alternative – while wryly noting that “the power to tax and the power to be popular is a power unknown to man...” It sounds like a quote from someone famous. It could equally well be a quip Charles dreamed up on the spot.

Another audience member raises concerns, serious ones, about nuclear waste disposal. Gurnard Island, off the west coast, had been used for anthrax experiments during World War II, and it had only just been cleaned up at great expense. Now a proposal had been made to use Gurnard as a site for nuclear waste. Charles answers that he favored halting the expansion of the nuclear industry, and that one should deal with the waste by vitrifying it and then storing

it at existing nuclear plants until such time as scientists could figure out a better method of disposal. This is an answer he will give many times in subsequent public meetings, but the subject is a touchy one in the Alliance. It will not become a serious problem for Charles until the very end of the election.

There are other questions, about housing shortages, about Crown Estates, and about other local matters, but at the end a fine old gentleman puts up his hand and says:

I think it might encourage the candidate to remember that Lord Gray thought he would skip meeting here at the last election – and he didn't get in!

Achiltibuie is clearly solid Kennedy country.

### Is it worth the effort?

The public meeting at Achiltibuie had attracted perhaps a dozen people, “a very well-attended meeting,” the Ullapool News will report, given that the community only boasts about 200 residents. It's misleading to think such meetings are unimportant. Charles has made the effort to get to this small community and has shown his concern: that alone will be discussed, particularly if unfavorable comparisons are drawn to predecessors in office or rivals for it. Locals will talk to family and friends about the candidate who came to their small village.

By my own tallies and from what was reported to the office in Dingwall, Charles had an average of about 50 who heard him each night during the first week of campaigning, and close to 80 during the second week (see the Appendix).

Overall, at least 900 heard him directly at public meetings (less than 2% of his electorate), with audience sizes rising substantially in the last days. On Eve of Poll, a local election tradition where all the candidates appear, in succession, in overcrowded halls in Dingwall, Tain, Invergordon, and Alness the night before the election, it was close to 1,000 that one day. By such measures, reaching 6% of Achiltibuie's voters made the trip out to this small community worthwhile.

'Rural Rides,' Tim Jackson's brief, unsigned, report of his day with Charles appears in the May 30<sup>th</sup> edition of The Economist. Though Tim writes that "the horizon of [the constituents'] concerns stops well short of London," that is not at all what I perceive: at public meetings, constituents ask questions about nuclear waste, defense policy, taxation, housing, or the overall state of the economy. Tim's report has the arch tone of the well-versed traveller among country bumpkins, disappointingly. Still, even before he wrote the article, Tim and I had agreed it was unlikely anyone in the constituency would read it, and my own efforts to locate a copy of The Economist in Dingwall met with no success.

### Later public meetings

Charles's public meetings nearly always followed the same format. He would be introduced by the chairman of the meeting, Charles would give his speech and answer questions, and when time ran short or there were no more questions, the chairman would close the meetings. More interesting, on occasion, were the chairman themselves.

One, unused to such occasions, stamped the floor before speaking. Another browbeat the audience, as though it were a near sacred duty to vote Kennedy. Yet another inauspiciously introduced him by saying that when he first met Charles, he hadn't been sure it was even worth the party's time to consider him as a candidate. One chairman closed the meeting by saying:

You've heard Mr. Kennedy's discourse, fluently, without a single note. There's a pad in front of him: the top sheet is blank, so he didn't refer to anything, but more importantly, he didn't refer to a single name of an individual in opposition on either side, neither the leader of one side or another – and I that's a very refreshing thing.

To say Charles "didn't refer to anything" could have been heard as a slight, or an observation that politicians were full of hot, but contentless, air. As formulated, and likely understood, it was actually meant as a compliment.

There were also known detractors. One SNP supporter tried very hard to elicit the title of the Alliance campaign song from Charles, sure it was an old imperial tune, sure it showed the Alliance to be closet Tories. Another SNP supporter made a point of dogging Charles's heels, appearing at several public meetings to challenge, if not nail him, on the issue of nuclear waste.

One of the more interesting supporters, second in command of a local Alliance party, made his living as a dustman. He was the only one I encountered for whom it was a point of pride to order the texts of laws and actually read them. Charles later said it was a frequent mistake made by parties, including his own, to think that the only people important in shaping local opinion were the priests,

doctors, or schoolteachers. Dustmen, after all, were likely to know as many if not more local residents than educated local notables did.

Some supporters also made special efforts, including Father Coyle of Dornie, a great fan of Charles. Father Coyle had studied in America and lived in a community near the Isle of Skye, and made a special effort to get to the Lochcarron public meeting to hear Charles. He cheerfully let me know, that evening, that listening to Charles was far more entertaining and interesting than going to the mass he would have otherwise attended. Later, he would invite us and some parishioners to his rooms in Dornie after his Sunday service. We spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon telling tales, talking politics, and consuming far too much excellent whisky. It wasn't a campaign day.

Audiences, too, could surprise. At the Maryburgh meeting, the audience applauded the moment Charles walked in the door, before he'd uttered a word. At Torridon, on the west coast, it was the question session. There were a number of well-educated, retired residents present, including a former Cambridge physics professor. They delighted in discussing politics. So delighted that they began completely ignoring the candidate. Charles made several efforts to get a word in edgewise, but after a while simply sat back, bemused he was being made so irrelevant.

While Charles's campaign speech did not change much, his response to questions became increasingly relaxed. He opened the meeting at Gairloch, on the west coast, self-deprecatingly noting by holding around 50 public meetings,

by polling day, I will have achieved something I thought was impossible which is being genuinely sick of the sound of my own voice, a contradiction in terms, normally, for MPs . . .

In responding to an arcane question about how funds were distributed to local government, Charles said

. . . which is an improvement in what we've got at the moment, where you have this, well, invisible formula which the Scottish Office use and which Russell Johnston in a debate one night once asked Malcolm Rifkind when he was announcing the rate support grant settlements a few months ago for local authorities. Sir Russell said: 'Well, I assume the Secretary of State, looking at the figures which he's announced, has gone back to the age-old ATHINE Formula which we thought had been abandoned by the Scottish Office.' The Secretary of State said: 'I'm not quite acquainted with the formula the Honorable Member for Inverness, Nairn and Lochaber is referring to.' And Sir Russell, with some satisfaction, replied: 'Oh, I'm sure the Secretary of State knows what I mean: Ach, To Hell, It's Near Enough!'

This Gairloch meeting took place midway through the campaign, and that gave Charles a moment to reflect. A young questioner asked why the Alliance seemed to be struggling in the polls, and whether that was a case for not having opinion polls at all. In answer, Charles jested that "when you're going down in the opinion polls, I'm firmly of the view that they should be banned!" This earned him good-natured laughter, prompting Charles to tell a polling anecdote:

There's a cautionary note about opinion polls. Dr. George Gallup, who set up the Gallup organization, was once giving a lecture in the United States about how good opinion polls were, particularly Gallup opinion polls, and when it came to questions and answers like this, a lady stood up in the audience.

She said: 'Dr. Gallup, if your opinion polls are so accurate and so sensitive and can predict what's happening in terms of general movements in public attitudes, why is it I've never had my opinion polled, and I've never met anyone, or met anyone who's met anyone, who's had their opinion polled?' And Gallup replied: 'Well, Madam, you must understand that the probability in the United States of having your opinion polled by the Gallup organization is about the same as the probability of being struck by lightning.' And the lady said: 'But Dr. Gallup, I've been struck by lightning – twice!'

Charles's answer to the first part of the question is less light-hearted:

We're still clearly not doing well enough. I tend to think the basic problem has been that we've been too negative and haven't gone out and talked . . . about what we want to do, instead of what's wrong with everybody else. So far, this election has really come down to one issue and that's Mrs. Thatcher.

By this point, Charles had also developed a standard closing joke. He claimed to have met a group of schoolchildren, who, after talking to him, had innocently asked: 'And what will you do after the election, Mr Kennedy?' It was a joke at his own expense. He did get his comeuppance at Gairloch, though, from an audience member who well-remembered what had happened to Charles's predecessor. As the laughter subsided, an answer wafted from the back of the hall: 'You'll be Lord Kennedy!'

## Going to the People

### Setting the scene

In its effort to provide an alternative, the Alliance had to ask itself where it could find supporters. That dissatisfaction with both Labour and Tory was not minor had been shown by the 25% of the electorate who had voted for neither in 1983. Yet that meant Alliance candidates had to make themselves simultaneously appealing to both camps – in economic arguments appealing to worker and employer alike, say – and have answers for those who worried that a strong third party would simply split the opposition vote and ensure Thatcher's re-election. Political agitation by Scottish nationalists since the 1970s meant a further yardstick: what did the Alliance candidate think about greater political autonomy or even independence for Scotland? Disaffected Conservatives in the Highlands might even vote for the SNP to send a message to their own party about this.

This did worry Charles. His constituency – at least the Ross and Cromarty part – had been held by Hamish Gray, his Tory predecessor, for 13 years, and Charles had defeated him in 1983 by a mere 1,704 votes, just under 5%. Then, 34% had voted Tory, 14% Labour, and 14% SNP, so Charles faced an electorate in 1987 in which, four years earlier, 62% had not voted for him. That also explained the extra effort made to personally address campaign letters to the 2,000-odd first-time voters, trying to woo those whose political preference was not yet known. Given that narrow 1983 win, they could prove decisive.

Holding public meetings, while necessary and expected of all candidates, was also of limited utility. Those who came were interested in politics or the

election, and often older. My impression was that most were sympathetically inclined to Charles, which meant his public meetings were not occasions to win over the unconvinced. Mobilizing his base was certainly important; it was unclear whether that base was large or loyal enough to bring him success in 1987.

So if voters who needed persuading weren't coming to Charles, Charles would go to them. But where could one find larger numbers of potential voters in one place? The first answer was provided by institutions such as old-age homes and hospitals, businesses or industries with many workers, and livestock auctions or agricultural exhibits.

A second possibility was to greet those going to or coming from church, but the intersection of religion and politics was tricky enough already for Charles. As a Catholic who embodied a faith practiced by only about one in six Scots, he avoided religiously-tinged issues or occasions whenever he could. In any case, it was an unspoken rule that regardless of faith, candidates simply did not hold public meetings on Sundays, the day of rest.

The third answer was to consider where people went when. The High Street of a small town in the later afternoons when many were out shopping was a possibility. I experienced a version of this early on, in visits Charles made to the shops in town in the afternoon before a public meeting. Local shopkeepers might talk to their customers about it, let them know Charles was in town, point to the flyer they'd let him put up in their store announcing that evening's meeting.

Each setting had its advantages and yielded differing information. Visiting institutions, businesses, or livestock auctions showed Charles had made a special

effort to come, underscoring the importance of that location. Many potential voters could be reached with a single visit. On the other hand, such visits could be stiff, hurried, the interactions brief. They often didn't let Charles hear much about what particular local concerns were.

'Doing the streets,' on the other hand, often yielded surprising responses, the interaction heightened by Charles prompting passers-by to tell him how they thought the election was going. This often led people to give their assessment of how well they thought *Charles* was doing. Responses were ambiguous enough to afterwards speculate about their significance. Just how representative was what we had heard on the streets today?



Charles Kennedy, Dingwall High Street

Curiously, 'doing the shops' seemed almost the complete opposite of 'doing the streets.' Shopkeepers frequently were loquacious, but often didn't directly comment about either campaigns or candidates. They might even avoid saying, unless prompted, which candidates had or had not yet been seen in town. It was politic to be cautious and non-committal, though it could have also reflected a general disinterest they, or their customers, had in the election. People were much more direct on the streets, but then said things hard to interpret. Talking with people where they worked, especially at larger industries or businesses, seemed to give Charles information he trusted more, or at least mentioned most often, about what concerned his constituents.

Getting such feedback, or reaching these voters, was another matter. Highland Fabricators, the oil rig company at the mouth of the Cromarty Firth, was one of the largest employers in the constituency. It wasn't possible to talk to the workers inside the plant, so Charles settled for other encounters. One night, he stayed up late just so as to catch the 3 AM ferry that took the early shift workers to their jobs. If they had to get up to get to work at such an hour, he argued, their hard-working candidate should do so as well.

Several times, a group of us went to the factory gates to hand out campaign literature. Charles, in blue jeans, work shirt, and a bright yellow rain slicker – the Alliance color, after all – greeted workers with a handshake. He did approach these encounters with some trepidation: these were more likely Labour than Alliance voters. While he could be encouraged by positive comments thrown his way as the men hurried through the gates, some of these workers were more

churlish, if not unkind. “Eh, you’re wasting your time here,” one muttered to Charles as he passed nearby.

### Visiting institutions

More through inadvertence than good planning, we often arrived at old-age homes in places like Muir of Ord or Strathpeffer just as residents were eating lunch in the common dining-room. It did save us from needing to go room to room. Residents were usually locals, and if Charles had not encountered them in previous years, on his many visits, he often knew their relatives or neighbors.

There were any number of alert, quite sharp-tongued, older ladies in such places who made no bones of what they thought about politicians. Curious that they only saw them just before elections, they’d say. Or they might pointedly tell Charles to his face that they hadn’t voted for him the last time and weren’t planning on voting for him this time either, thank you.

Charles’s manner on such occasions was wonderfully light. Irrespective of interlocutor, his script when greeting residents usually went:

1. I’m Charles Kennedy
2. Politics is dreadful and boring, especially the amount on TV now
3. I’m on the campaign trail and very busy
4. We’re not taking anything for granted in the election
5. I hope you’ll spare us a thought on polling day

This wasn't forced. If anything, his tone was respectful, particularly in his lovely "spare us a thought" formulation. There was no hard sell, no election promises given, and if anything, a deliberate effort to avoid saying "vote for me!" It gave potentially awkward encounters a pleasant propriety.

Charles quite enjoyed such visits. These older residents often gave him more honest feedback than did some younger constituents, who in public settings felt they needed to be a little cautious when talking with their MP. Encounters with staff were another matter. In Ullapool, it was clear a mutual favor was being asked for: if you see to it that that dangerous road gets paved, you've got our vote. Elsewhere, as we left, we'd be told by staff members that even if the ladies had been rather biting, they were nevertheless Alliance supporters.

In the case of the Strathpeffer Rheumatism Hospital, Charles had been able to find money to help keep it open, and one of his supporters there, the in-house physiotherapist, took us into his office to chat. His main concern, aside from the impact of Thatcher's policies on the health care system, were the effects on the Scottish population of eating fish or sheep contaminated by fallout from Chernobyl. It was one of the few times in the campaign when an event from far away was mentioned, and even then, only in the context of its local effects.

One of these establishments had a new director who seemed notably unenthusiastic at seeing Charles walk in his door. Perhaps a little incautiously, Charles asked after this director's political preferences, and was told that while he used to vote Labour, he would now be voting Alliance. Why was this? Charles asked, expecting praise for his many efforts in the previous years to improve

health services in the region, perhaps even a paean to enlightened Alliance policies. Nothing of the sort. The director had seen Charles on television and had heard him on the radio quite a bit, and Charles seemed a good sort. And he would help keep the Tories out of power. The director continued to look grim, and Charles seemed a little crestfallen. It wasn't his efforts to improve health services or change policies that mattered, it was the good personal impression he'd made.

We thought we understood what we were hearing, only to repeatedly discover how wrong we were. In Shieldaig, a small village on the west coast, an older lady saw Charles and told him he was wasting his time there. Why was that? Charles asked, thinking he had perhaps stumbled on a nest of opposition, or, as at Highland Fabricators, a Labour Party stronghold. "Och," she replied, "everyone here will vote for you anyway – you should be using your time more intelligently than this!" In Alness, on the east coast, we met an older woman who quite decidedly said she'd made up her mind some time ago about the election. She wasn't about to change it. The three of us listening, including Charles, took that – not least because of strong SNP support in this town – to mean she would most certainly not be voting Alliance. We could not have been more mistaken. Charles had met her institutionalized son some time ago and her son had been quite taken with Charles – which had brought her around to now support his re-election.

But some negative messages were indeed what they appeared to be. We were 'doing the streets' in Tain and were a little puzzled. The community had strongly supported Charles in 1983, but in our hours there, we couldn't find any Alliance supporters. One older man told Charles he wouldn't vote for him because he disliked David Owen. No amount of Charles's persuasive charm, personal

observations about Owen, or the reminder Charles wasn't David, had any effect. Another man, a few minutes later, said he wouldn't vote for Charles because the only way to get Maggie out was to get Labour in, and it would just be a wasted vote if he gave it to the Alliance. Charles didn't have a ready answer for this.

### Farmers and farms

Farmers, unsurprisingly, did not often congregate, but one place they did was at the auction marts in Dingwall. On one occasion when we went, heifers were being auctioned off to a crowd of perhaps eighty farmers, many dressed in blue coveralls. Charles stood out in his suit and tie, though his accent and crofter family heritage reduced the clear social distance. While not necessarily taciturn, these farmers were hard to draw out when it came to politics: "you never know what farmers think," Charles muttered after a morning's worth of hobnobbing with them.

He was doing rather better than Sir Russell, who, though he hailed from Skye, seemed light years removed from farmers' concerns. Scotsheep 1987, an agricultural exhibition, was held at an Invergordon farm midway through the campaign, prompting Frank Rennie, president of the Scottish Crofter's Union to comment on June 5<sup>th</sup> in the West Highland Free Press, and echoing Charles, that

even to escape for a little while from the constant bombardment of the election, it would have been a stimulating and therapeutic day. But this year Scotsheep provided much more.

Rennie was not spared, as both Charles and Sir Russell were in attendance and Jimmy Proven, MEP, inaugurated the occasion.

As they walked past flocks with dozens of sheep, Sir Russell turned to Charles and in all seriousness said: “you know, I never realized that there were more than two kinds of sheep . . .” To be fair, one attraction of Scots sheep were the exotic breeds, red-faced Rouge de L'Ouest, Jacobs, Bleu du Maine, and Charollais. But it was a testament to a man who had grown up surrounded by sheep and who represented a constituency filled with sheep, that Sir Russell had managed to lift his sights so far above them . . .

Not all farmers were reticent. The public meeting at Portmahomack, on the eastern edge of the constituency, was chaired by a young pig farmer. A Tory at heart, he said, he had become president of the local branch of the National Farmer's Union to get some action for people like him. He exported breeding pigs to Japan, and the Highlands and Islands Development Board was doing nothing to support him. We went to his farm for coffee, biscuits, and a chat after the meeting. It was easier, he said, to reach Charles on the phone than his local district councilman. Besides, “people vote for personalities here.” As we left, he pressed some packed pork chops on us for our dinner. It was illegal for candidates to treat voters to meals. Voters treating candidates to meals was evidently quite a different matter!

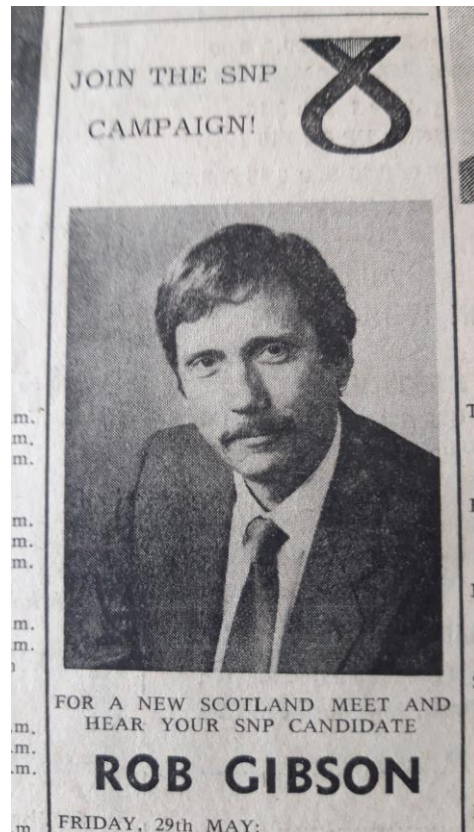
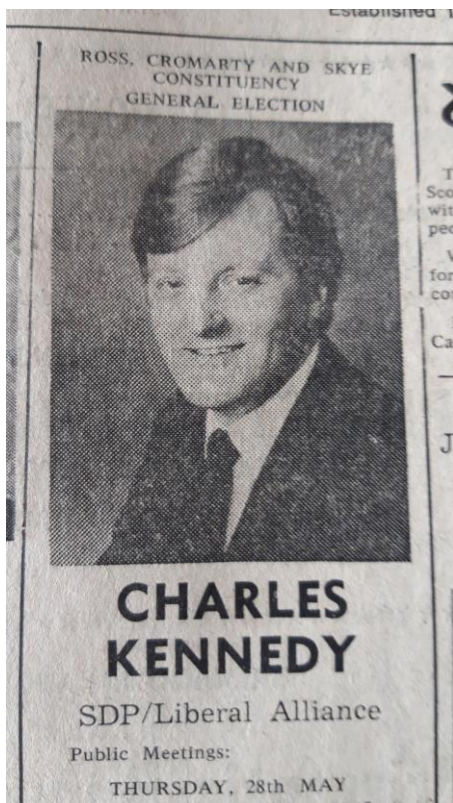
Farms in the area were not just small enterprises run by struggling families. At one point, on a trip from one old age home to the next, we got stuck on a bridge being rebuilt near the Conan River. That prompted Charles, as we waited,

to recount his first big publicity coup when he had taken on Hamish Gray in 1983. The Conan River, as was its wont, had risen over its banks, flooding cropland and washing people's houses away. The government, which included Minister Gray, wasn't reacting to the local situation. The land most affected was part of Roderick Sterling's estate; Sterling also held the ceremonial position of deputy Lord-Lieutenant of Ross and Cromarty. This position is unpaid and non-political, its prime duty is to uphold the dignity of the Crown. Mr. Sterling, Charles added in explanation, was a member of the impoverished aristocracy. As part of the battle with the government to address the Conan River flooding, Charles had met, and made common cause, with Roderick.

As Roderick's home in Urray was near our route, as much for social reasons as anything else, Charles decided to pay him a visit. Over drinks Roderick offered in his baronial home, whisky of course, he discussed the dreadful state of agriculture. His manager had recently let him know that the estate's deficit this year would be about £65,000. "You can't keep that up for many years," Roderick noted, leaving open just how large the deficit would have to be to really become a problem. The conversation turned to the election as well as what could be done about the dreadful overpopulation of foxes, adders, and marders. As we were about to leave, the American was called in to admire, among Roderick's many other trophies, the moose head on the wall, with its magnificent antlers, that he had bagged on a trip to Alaska.

## Media publicity


The free mailing, if done as Charles did, would reach every registered voter, but many voters treated this as the campaign propaganda it was and paid little heed to it. A more effective avenue was to place ads in the local papers, the Ross-shire Journal and the West Highland Free Press. These came either in the form of a head shot of the candidate together with their schedule for that week, or as a



larger display ad which conveyed the candidate or the party's message.

GENERAL ELECTION

ROSS, CROMARTY AND SKYE CONSTITUENCY



**CHARLES KENNEDY**  
**SDP-LIBERAL ALLIANCE CANDIDATE**

The Alliance Programme aims to:

- \* Create jobs and control inflation
- \* Co-operate, not confront
- \* Restore Scotland's Parliament within the UK
- \* Scrap the Poll Tax and end the Tory attack oncrofting communities
- \* Promote one efficient environmentally responsible energy policy
- \* Give hope and jobs to Scotland's youth
- \* Give help and hope to Scotland's elderly
- \* Cancel Trident for a minimum deterrent to negotiate arms reductions
- \* Support a better resourced National Health Service
- \* Secure financial stability for farmers and fishermen
- \* Win fairer elections

On these or any issue put your questions to Charles Kennedy - and  
on June 11

**MAKE SURE IT'S KENNEDY X**

Published by A. M. MacDonald, Election Agent, 5 MacGregor's Court, Dingwall. Telephone 62152

Unless paid for out of pocket or by a supporter, candidates' budgets did not allow for many such ads. For wider coverage, say in other Scottish papers constituents might read, candidates had to rely on reporters and editors to cover their districts.

Charles did voice some good-humored exasperation with journalists at The Scotsman for heading one article "Is Charlie Still their Darling?" on June 1. He was hardly displeased by their assessment that "it would be another major surprise if Charles Kennedy didn't return to Westminster." That faded when he read "Highland Marginal Set for Close Battle" in Aberdeen's Press and Journal the next day. In it, Duncan Ross opined that:

Mr. Kennedy is uncomfortably aware that tactical, anti-Tory voting by Labour and SNP supporters may have helped him last time, but he has to work hard for their loyalty this time around . . . Highlanders, however, have proven exceptionally loyal in the past to a good constituency MP of any party, and Mr. Kennedy has the added advantage of national TV exposure. . . . During the last campaign, it was Mr. Kennedy who pointed out – correctly, in his case – that bottom of the poll had been the best position from which to take this seat over the past 20 years. Labour and the SNP virtually tied for that place in 1983.

Stuart Lindsay's June 4 article "Highland Nuclear Fears Could Sway Voters" in the Glasgow Herald was even less pleasing, implying that should the nuclear waste issue become prominent, it would likely benefit the SNP. While "all the candidates rely on national party policies to answer local problems," Lindsay argued there was no way to tell how the election would go:

On past evidence, the constituency is highly volatile, any one of four candidates a possible winner but Mr. Spencer Nairn (Conservative) at

the moment looking the least likely. Readiness to indulge in tactical voting was proved in 1983 and the results of national opinion polls could trigger that phenomenon again in any one of three directions.

Charles could exercise little control over the content of such assessments, though one advantage of incumbency was to get to know many of the journalists who covered the Highlands. He had a good sense of where their sympathies lay.

As his party's spokesman on health and social security, radio and television channels would contact Charles for comment, and he had high media exposure. He had no control over where his pronouncements would be heard, however, and what he said was not always broadcast into his constituency. His statements could end up benefitting his party more than they boosted his election chances. An example of this was provided by a televised evening debate about the situation of youth in Scotland, held between a group of young politicians standing for election. For this, Charles flew to Glasgow. The SNP was represented by Alex Salmond, who would go on to win Banff and Buchan, the Conservatives by Michael Forsythe, who would defend his seat in Stirling, and Labour by Gordon Brown, who would keep his seat in Dunfermline East.

The debate would be far less civil than in Horsham; the occasion was used to discredit the positions held by those representing other parties. As the debate was broadcast into Ross, Cromarty and Skye, it made sense for Charles to participate: being on the 'telly' was what mattered, not whether you or your party was bested in debate. There was a cost to this jaunt, though. Charles arrived back in Dingwall at 3 AM, talked campaign strategy until 5 AM with Sandra, whom he

had barely seen in the previous 24 hours, and had to be alert enough to participate in a Moray Firth Radio show at 8 AM.

This station, the northernmost private radio station in the UK, was located in Inverness. Charles had worked, briefly, for BBC Highland as a reporter, and as a sitting member of Parliament had even periodically hosted a music request program on Moray Firth. It helped his name recognition particularly among the young. His relationship to and with the station's manager was thus good, and on this particular occasion there was some discussion of his doing more phone-in programs should he be re-elected. During the campaign, there were several occasions when Charles appeared on radio programs to answer questions listeners phoned in, on at least one occasion together with Sir Russell Johnston.

The media rarely came to the candidates, and it was partly for that reason that the Two Davids decided to hold daily press conferences in London during the campaign to maximize their message. As a result, candidates who were also national spokespersons for their parties had to spend an inordinate amount of time during their own election campaigns outside their constituencies. Those in tight races, or with narrow majorities, were endangered by this. For Charles, it meant media-focused trips to London, Aberdeen, Glasgow – along with a narrowly avoided trip to Edinburgh and the rather ill-advised trip to Cardiff which I had taken part in. While valuable in connecting Charles to what was going on elsewhere in the UK, they were time wasted as far as his own campaign was concerned. The most fruitful radio and TV appearances, in the end, were those he could do in Inverness, since whatever their other purposes, that guaranteed they would be heard or seen in his constituency.

## Other efforts

Messages to voters could be considerably more direct. One privately-owned car used in the campaign was fitted out with a loudhailer on the roof rack, and in the afternoon before public meeting, various of us would drive through the respective community, announcing the meeting to echoing buildings. One rapidly ran out of ways to promote the same message, and on at least one occasion, to lend a little exoticism to the campaign, the American did some announcing as well. At the end of the 1983 campaign, Charles, a David Bowie fan, got a little carried away and in lieu of political pronouncements, broadcast some Bowie music to the citizenry. Near the end of the 1987 campaign, in what became a heavy rainstorm, a convey of cars festooned with Alliance stickers, including a pickup truck Charles stood in, wound its way through a number of Easter Ross communities, loudly broadcasting the message to vote Kennedy.

Leafleting was still another strategy. These were actually bumper sticker-shaped advertisements with a picture of the candidate on the front and quite a bit of text on the back. They could be distributed into people's mailboxes. Their major disadvantage was a lack of adhesive on the back, so it required ingenuity to affix them to one's car. There were also small decals made which bore the logo "C.K. OK." The schoolchildren liked them.

Postering, on the other hand, was something of a game. In the absence of large billboards, one had to be inventive about where to put them. It was illegal to affix them to convenient places, such as telephone poles or road signs, so large trees were favored instead. It was an ongoing challenge to ensure wind, rain, or

the depredations wrought by rival candidates' teams, would not make them disappear. You might spend a long day affixing posters on trees only to find all them gone the next day. SNP supporters were reputedly fond of removing Alliance posters in the dead of night. The local SNP, in turn, glued their posters onto cardboard and then hoisted them high on street lampposts; how they did this was a great mystery. As the SNP reused their cardboard, though, the effect was marred since you could see posters from previous elections peeking out. It was amateurish, as though they couldn't be bothered to find new cardboard.

We, in turn, came up with the nearly fool-proof tactic of gluing Kennedy posters onto rockfaces, especially along roads in the west. These were impossible to remove, and ensured everyone would remember Charles long after the vote was in. I began to look at the landscape not with admiration for its beauty but with the nagging question: "where can I put a poster of Charles up?"

No matter how much one did, the message still might not get through. One evening a week or so into the campaign and outside the Strathpeffer Hotel, three young women of voting age walked past Charles's red Toyota, festooned with bright stickers that read: "This time, like last time, it must be Kennedy."

First woman: Kennedy – what's that?

Second woman: That's the MP.

First: What party?

Second, leaning over for a closer look: The SDP Alliance.

So much for the reputed advantages of being the incumbent.

## The Competition

### Setting the scene

Four parties contest Ross, Cromarty and Skye in this election. In the last two elections, the voting percentages were as follows:

	<u>1979</u>	<u>1983</u>	change
Conservative	42.4	33.7	- 8.7
Labour	20.1	14.0	- 6.1
SNP	23.6	13.9	- 9.7
Liberal / Alliance	13.9	/ 38.5	+24.6

By the numbers, the Conservative Party was Charles's strongest competition. Still, Ross and Cromarty's history was one of electing Liberals, not Conservatives. When Hamish Gray was elected in 1970, it was the first time in 133 years that a Conservative had represented the district, lending support to the local assessment that "people vote for the man, not for the party."

It did matter what that man did, or more pointedly, failed to do while in office, though. By 1983, Hamish Gray was perceived as not working enough in the interests of his constituents, in particular with respect to the many who had lost their jobs when a smelter in Invergordon shut down. Hamish Gray was junior Energy Minister at the time as well as a member of the ruling party, and he'd allowed it to happen – perhaps even helped instigate it! That wasn't right. MPs weren't supposed to bring pain to their voters, and this local case seemed further

proof of Margaret Thatcher's hard-heartedness. At least some Tory voters in 1983 saw in Charles a better promise to defend their interests, though Charles's slim victory that June 9<sup>th</sup> did not rid them of Hamish Gray's presence.

On the contrary: the near-immediate effect was to push him upstairs into the House of Lords. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, the following notice appeared in The London Gazette, the official chronicle of UK government actions:

The QUEEN has been pleased by Letters Patent under the Great Seal of the Realm, dated 4th July 1983, to confer the dignity of a Barony of the United Kingdom for life upon the Right Honourable James Hector Northey (Hamish) Gray by the name, style and title of BARON GRAY OF CONTIN, of Contin in the District of Ross and Cromarty.

Baron Gray of Contin would serve as Minister of State for Scotland until 1986, so even as a defeated MP, he was still very present in Scottish political life.

### The Conservative opponent

Charles thus faced a new Conservative Party candidate, Frank Spencer Nairn, aged 38, a man of many parts. Nairn had worked in Inverness, London, and the Middle East, and now lived on a farm near Beaulieu where he and his family had sheep, deer, holiday cottages, and a National Nature Reserve. His campaign literature noted that "by training, he is a graduate engineer and a chartered accountant; he also obtained a first class Master's degree in Business Administration. His slogan for the campaign was "Right on course . . . and on the right course for Ross, Cromarty and Skye."



I attended one of only seven public meetings Nairn held, at Alness, and it was tumultuous. Like all the other candidates at one meeting or another, he appeared together with a better-known representative of his party, Jimmy Proven, a Conservative member of the European Parliament.

Nairn's speech was rambling, a mix of pleas to continue the great work the Tories had begun and attacks on the other parties. He ridiculed the SNP for having sent him a letter soliciting his support and called the Alliance muddled. Charles Kennedy was denounced as downright dangerous, since "a vote for Kennedy could

be a vote for Kinnock,” the Labour leader. As it was, Charles had a 6:1 voting record against Thatcher’s government, a statement greeted with muttering in the room as many present did not seem to find anything wrong with that. Late in his remarks, he turned to the idea of giving more power to the people.

The opening salvo came from an incensed Alliance supporter:

I’d like to ask the candidate how has he got the audacity to come here and talk about power to the people and democracy, when the people in Ross, Cromarty and Skye in the last election voted Hamish Gray out, democratically voted him out, and within a week Mrs. Thatcher sent him back here as Secretary of State with power for the Highlands and Islands – after we had rejected him! Is that democratic and was that power to the people?

Nairn’s answered in part by saying that he was not Hamish Gray. But as the Tory candidate, he was of course trying to succeed him. “If you were elected, God forbid,” another questioner began, “what is your policy towards the [Invergordon] smelter?” meaning the one Hamish Gray had failed to save.

Nairn tried to defend his party’s policies, doing so in part by reading out of a blue folder bearing the clearly legible title Questions of Policy. He did not appear to have previously read it, and so shaky was he on his facts as well as his party’s policies, that his honest, rather helpless, answer to a number of questions was “I don’t know.” That prompted a number of better-informed questioners to *tell* him what his own party program said.

Regardless of topic, Frank Spenser Nairn’s answers seemed only to incense his audience. When he said the nuclear waste issue was an opportunity, a voter at the back of the hall loudly retorted “that’s absolute rubbish!” Asked about

Thatcher's Youth Training Scheme, he admitted he himself wouldn't actually hire anyone who'd been trained under this scheme. But if youths wouldn't be hired, another voice in the hall complained, they'd just go on the dole then, so of what use was this scheme? Responding to a question about aid to Africa, Nairn said he advocated helping the Third World help itself, adding, "I'm absolutely clear in my own mind on my stance in this subject." The formulation left the impression he wasn't clear on this subject at all. In the most dramatic moment, after Nairn had said he regarded the SNP as terrorists, it so provoked an older man that he stalked up to the front of the hall. Inches from Nairn's face, he demanded: "Do you object to my being here??" With some vehemence, he said he'd served his country loyally in the army and he supported the SNP and he was not about to stand being called a terrorist. When Nairn said "When I'm your MP . . ." an Alliance supporter to my right loudly interjected "You'll never be my MP!" Nairn's closing remarks were greeted by boos and the chairwoman, striving for a calmer tone to end the meeting concluded that "life is full of problems . . ." – to which someone in the audience loudly retorted "Yes, Tory government!"

The heckling was considerable, and inconsiderate, but it may have also been where we were. Alness is close to Invergordon, site of that smelter, and regional sentiment towards Tories was arguably still not the best. I was later told that in 1983, at a public meeting Hamish Gray had held in Alness, he'd faced 100 angry, shouting residents. His answer to them, reportedly, was: "I hired this hall, and *I'm* going to speak here!"

## The Labour opponent

The Labour Party faced the daunting task of trying to win a seat it had not held since 1945, though that is a little misleading. In the war years, Malcolm MacDonald, MP for Ross and Cromarty, had helped his more famous father Ramsay put together a national cross-party government. For their pains, both were expelled from the Labour Party, and, long prefiguring the creation of the SDP, they then created a new political entity. In 1936, Malcolm MacDonald was elected as the National Labour Organization candidate, with one of his opponents representing the Labour Party. You could hence say Charles represented a constituency that had actually never elected a 'proper' Labor Party candidate.

On the other hand, the Labour Party in 1987 was more of a genuine alternative to the Conservative Party than either Alliance or SNP were. Despite it not having been successful in the constituency before, should Labour put up an attractive candidate, it was thinkable they might win this seat. Charles himself was proof that party label might not be a genuine hindrance.

Michael Macmillan was a 46-year-old solicitor who had worked in various parts of Scotland before returning to Dingwall in 1969, the year he joined the Labour Party. He established a private practice in Alness, was active in various legal organizations and also taught. His campaign literature claimed he was the only candidate born, educated and working in the constituency; his slogan was "an excellent local candidate" who thus had "an unrivalled insight in the problems – personal, business, financial – which trouble Constituents."

11th JUNE, 1987 GENERAL ELECTION

## ROSS, CROMARTY & SKYE



### MICHAEL MACMILLAN

**The Local Man – The Natural Progression**

1979 TORIES 42%	1983 SDP 39%	1987 LABOUR 31%
SNP 24%	TORIES 34%	SDP 29%
LABOUR 20%	LABOUR 14%	TORIES 27%
LIBERALS 14%	SNP 13%	SNP 13%
TORY HELD	SDP GAIN	LABOUR GAIN

Owing to a typographical error in last week's advertisement, a mistake was made in the 1987 figures of "The Natural Progression", and readers will note the corrected figures above.

**MORI POLL—SCOTLAND, 25.5.87**

LABOUR 44%    CONSERVATIVE 27%    ALLIANCE 17%    SNP 10%

### IT MUST BE LABOUR

Only Labour has the concern, the will and the policies to tackle our legacy of 30% unemployed.

**THIS TIME  
MAKE  
NO MISTAKE**

**MACMILLAN**  
THE LABOUR PARTY CANDIDATE

**X**

Published by John Greene, Election Agent, 25A High Street, AIness, Ross-shire

This claim was repeatedly hammered home. In a public meeting of Macmillan's that I attended at Conon Bridge, he spent a good deal of time telling stories to illustrate how locally connected he was. His legal work gave him familiarity with constituents in a manner that prepared him, he claimed, for what he assumed would be similar work as an MP. His campaign literature did not mention his experience, or lack thereof, in elective office. Once he left the theme of his localness, his speech became a recitation of the Labour Party manifesto, which he rather lamely defended by stating: "I make no apology for reading." That was rather in contrast to Charles's fluency.

Macmillan was more evasive, or perhaps not as well-informed, about the actual contours of Labour Party policy, and a good part of his speech reiterated Labour Party rhetoric directed against Thatcher. “How can she be proud of the things she has done?” he asked at one point in a rather aggrieved tone. The impression it left was that Macmillan was running more against Tory Party rule, or against Thatcher, than against Charles, the incumbent. Though he did make the point that 30% in the constituency were unemployed, Charles was apparently innocent by virtue of his very powerlessness:

I don't blame Charles Kennedy [for this] in any way, because he is not an MP who is a member of government . . . He has no swing, he has no pull, he has no clout . . . Kennedy has presided over the highest rate of increase of unemployment that . . . the constituency has suffered – again, I don't say that's his fault, but if he is returned [to office] again, I do not see, in all logic, how he will have any clout to change that situation.

Powerlessness meant Charles was politically irrelevant. Macmillan's stance, interestingly, was echoed by the past president of the Scottish Conservative Party, who, at a meeting on June 5<sup>th</sup>, noted that while “the constituency may have been well-served by Charles Kennedy, his party is not worthy of your support.” Macmillan, at another meeting, had talked about Charles's “charm and magnetism,” hardly the kind of slashing criticism one might expect from an opponent.

When attacks were made on other candidates, they seemed to originate more among campaign agents or managers; candidates themselves remained cordial toward their competitors. Some who worked on the campaigns were also

not shy. At campaign headquarters in Dingwall we were told of one organizer who, for a public meeting Macmillan was holding on the Black Isle, was setting up chairs. In feigned innocence, he asked Labour staff: “should I put out 40, as I did for Charles Kennedy?” implying Macmillan didn’t stand a chance at attracting nearly that many listeners.

Macmillan’s stance, though, was a little curious. You could only be a relevant actor if you were in the governing party, he argued, yet the last MP in a governing party, Hamish Gray, had personally acted in a manner that went against the interests of his constituents. So by relevant actor, perhaps Macmillan meant relevant on the national stage. As it was, no individual MP could do anything about the vagaries of the world oil market. At best, an MP might be able to help out one or another institution, as Charles had been able to in the health sector.

Voters remembered that, even as they heard directly from Charles how difficult it was for him to get a hearing in London, or indeed how hard it was as an MP to influence policy. Charles had clearly decided to emphasize his role as a delegate, making a convincing case that this did not promise success every time. Hamish Gray, thinking about wider economic issues, seemed to have chosen the trustee role, to the displeasure of his voters. While his rhetoric about being local suggested he would be a delegate, Macmillan’s speech was about Labour Party policy. To Highland ears, that sounded as though the latter would take priority.

In subsequent public meetings, he stressed that his was a party of principle and what the Tories had done was unprincipled. One principle was to reduce rather than eliminate social differences, indicating he was not a radical Labourite.

It would be a very dreary society, he remarked at one point, if we were all equal, a statement perhaps meant to win over those suspicious of Labour's ideological tilt. Macmillan was likeable enough, but no rhetorical match for Charles. In fact, he could not even persuade his own family to support him: Macmillan's own mother made an £18 donation to the Alliance to help Charles get reelected.

### The SNP opponent

The SNP, while it enjoyed some support in the constituency, was often dismissed as a fringe group: they articulated important sentiments but had unrealistic dreams. Their tactics were also a source of opprobrium. Our outspoken host at the Strathpeffer Hotel dismissed them, memorably, as the Shiite Moslems of the North. They certainly lacked strong electoral support not just in the constituency but throughout Scotland, and were only able to win two or three seats at any given election, considerably less well than in the mid-1970s. The strongly autonomist, or as the term in current use had it, devolutionist tone of the message meant standing for election as an SNP candidate was to ask voters to put party before the individual – not necessarily a good idea in the Highlands.

Rob Gibson, the SNP's candidate, did have arguments in his favor and was also a considerably more adroit public speaker than Labour's Macmillan. By profession a teacher at the Alness Academy, 42-year-old Gibson had lived in the constituency for the previous 14 years. In 1974, he had run for a seat in Inverness, and did try for a local touch that could rival Charles's. "His passion for folk music," Gibson's campaign literature read, "com[es] second only to his interest in politics."

Gibson's stance was to run against London and its perceived centralist tendencies vis-à-vis Scotland. Only secondarily did he articulate an anti-Tory message:

If we look at the way Scots have been treated by government from London, we can see that calling us a province is perhaps complimenting; in fact, we really are an afterthought lorded over by a colonial government, governed by a party which has far from a majority of the seats in this country,

Gibson said at a public meeting in Fortrose. The 'colonial' theme, with all the political and electoral manipulation this was meant to imply, was also why the devolution referendum in 1979 was made to fail in Scotland: "Before, Britannia ruled the waves. Now, Britain waived the rules," Gibson quipped.

One part of the SNP's program Gibson reiterated was the claim that "the alternative on June the 11<sup>th</sup> is either Thatcher government or Scottish government," with its implication that this would be one in which the SNP played a major role. The SNP candidate for the Western Isles put his party's case succinctly in an ad he ran in the West Highland Free Press on June 5:

You know Labour can't win

You know the Tories are anti-Scottish

You know the Alliance are pro-Tory

London isn't just worried about a big SNP vote – they're terrified!

Rob Gibson was considerably more willing than Macmillan to attack Charles directly. When he was selected as SNP candidate, Gibson opined that the Alliance "had only been lent this seat in 1983 . . . We all know the Tories are the landlords and the Alliance their factors!" Only a few days into the campaign, Gibson had

sent a letter to the Ross-shire Journal challenging the Alliance's policy on nuclear waste reprocessing and transportation, and challenging Charles to a debate with his opponents. His letter closed with a salvo:

When will the Alliance parties face up to public scrutiny in comparison with the SNP and others? We all know that the secret society is discredited, but it seems SDP policies are yet another British state secret!

At least Gibson had the courtesy to deliver a copy of this letter to the Alliance office in Dingwall, though Sandra considered challenging him for doing so, based on election rules. Gibson initially had no election agent, and it was potentially an illegal practice for him to have acted as such by personally coming by. In the end, it was decided to not pursue it. Other than this initial challenge, SNP supporters engaged in more indirect messages, not just by (allegedly) tearing down Alliance posters but also by leaving Gibson's SNP stickers on Charles car. Some SNP supporters did try to heckle or embarrass Charles by their questions and behavior at his public meetings. As the final election results would show, support for the SNP's message would remain modest, Gibson's salvos no match for Charles's charm.

## Charles and the Alliance

### On call

As one of only a handful of MPs from his party, Charles had been 'on call' while in Parliament, either as SDP spokesman or to help Alliance candidates in by-elections. On the whole, he didn't mind, estimating he'd made 100 or 150 appearances on behalf of his party in the four years he'd been an MP. It was part of his job, giving him vastly greater media exposure than had he been a Labour or Tory backbencher. His maiden speech in Parliament came unusually quickly, only two months after he was elected – fittingly enough, about the status of youth.

During the election campaign, though, commitments to his party were secondary, at least in his own mind, to his re-election: the further he had to travel to help the party out, the less it helped his own effort to return to Westminster. There were three kinds of commitments. In descending order of preference for Charles they were joint and reciprocal campaign appearances with neighboring Alliance MPs, appearances on behalf of more distant Alliance candidates, and appearing as SDP or Alliance spokesman. It came down to time spent and geographic distance: the closer to his constituency the better, also in terms of media coverage. That early jaunt to Cardiff continued to rankle him.

Before the campaign proper, though, Charles had spoken on behalf of Alliance hopefuls on Orkney, Shetland, and the Hebrides, islands far to the west or north. Such favors were repaid, so Jim Wallace, Alliance MP for Orkney and Shetland, had been in Ross-shire to speak on Charles's behalf, and Robert MacLennan, SDP MP for Caithness and Sutherland, as the Alliance's spokesman on

agriculture, was available to help address such issues, as they were outside Charles's brief. During the campaign, Charles arranged joint public meetings with Maclennan as well as Sir Russell. Each spoke on the other's turf, so Charles spoke on Sir Russell's behalf at Beaulieu, and Sir Russell spoke on Charles's behalf at Inverness. This wasn't only to show unity of message or demonstrate party solidarity. It was a chance for everyone to catch up on political news, assess how the campaign was going, and plan future moves. It was also moral support.

### With fellow Scottish MPs

Charles held joint public meetings with Robert Maclennan in Ardgay, in Maclennan's constituency, and at Tain in Charles's constituency, where Maclennan began by recalling a public meeting there four years earlier:

I remember at that time commending to you Charles Kennedy with confidence that he would serve as an outstanding member of Parliament, because I had got to know him over previous months and I had come to admire him for his eloquence, his firmness of mind, his independence and his readiness to speak out – and it has not been denied by the experience we've had of him in Parliament. I think Charles has made his mark, and he's made it by the qualities that I commended to you at that time. He's made his mark in a way that is now recognized throughout the country. You elected the then-youngest member of Parliament at the time, and I believe he will be one of the longest serving members of Parliament before he's finished [laughter, applause].

It was a prescient assessment. Maclennan had actually been a Labour MP for 16 years before switching to the SDP, and his aristocratic background and demeanor, including when speaking the House of Commons, made his current political allegiance not a little ironic. Maclennan, Charles noted to me, was the perfect combination for the Highlands: anti-Tory yet still able to convey he was one of us. As with Roderick Sterling, it wasn't that easy to be both aristocratic and yet live in, or be from, a region full of those suspicious of authority.

Charles and Sir Russell Johnston had been in telephone contact since the Scottish campaign was launched, and had been together at the Scots sheep event in Invergordon. About a week before the election, they had organized a joint press conference in Inverness – for only six journalists – and for the occasion, Sir Russell donned a kilt, garb Charles studiously avoided wearing. The launch of the Alliance's Scottish campaign in Glasgow had been an opportunity to gauge just how much personality mattered for winning Highland seats.

Sir Russell was then in an expansive mood. His Tory opponent, Tessa Keswick – called “a well-known Society figure” as well as “resilient” and “a huge Thatcher fan” much later by the press – Sir Russell said, had published a “list of lies” in her election address. It simply wouldn't do to conduct a smear campaign like this: the accusations were rubbish and the whole thing simplistic. After this salvo, Sir Russell peered at the journalists present, and softening, said: “You can head that ‘The Fox Growled’ in your articles,” alluding to that morning's Scotsman article calling him “The Old Fox.” A Tory reporter snidely offered “...Whined?” from the back of the room.

There was a follow-up. Having done his best to present the party line, Sir Russell was asked “What plans to you have in the event of a Doomsday scenario?” This referred to having Labour win a majority in Scotland, but Thatcher re-elected everywhere else. After a moment, Sir Russell, doubtless still mulling over that Scotsman headline, dryly responded “We will go to our warrens and think...”

Not long after this Glasgow launch, the idea was floated that there really ought to be a face-to-face meeting between Lord Mackie, president of the Scottish Liberal Party, Arthur Adair, the Alliance’s regional campaign manager for Scotland, Sir Russell and Charles, respectively the chairs of their parties in Scotland, to plan campaign strategy. All four were to converge on Edinburgh. But on the planned day, Adair and Mackie would be in Glasgow, Charles would be heading to the west coast for public meetings, and Sir Russell would be travelling from Fort William to Inverness and would need to rent a car to take this detour, probably arriving too late. I innocently asked whether one couldn’t just consult by phone, and Sandra fortunately agreed. Coordinating strategy sounded like it made sense, but it also illustrated how the limited time a candidate had could be eaten up by party matters only partly connected to their own re-election.

### Alliance campaign strategy

I thought my first day on the campaign – with its crazy London to Scotland to Wales to London and then back to Scotland itinerary – had been a fluke. It soon became clear there was an internal struggle in the Alliance about just how this campaign was to be run. Their Press Pack read:

A national campaign conference will be held in the Whitehall Room of the National Liberal Club at 8:30 AM daily from Monday to Friday, starting on Monday, May 18, 1987. Press conferences will be given by the Alliance leaders David Steel and David Owen, with Alliance spokesmen as appropriate. . . . The campaigns have been very much designed with television coverage in mind. The two leaders will visit separate television regions in the course of each campaign day before getting together in a third region for the evening for a public meeting or media interviews . . .

On a policy level, the work of bringing together Liberal and SDP policies into a coherent and internally consistent framework for the Alliance began . . . at the conclusion of the party conference seasons of 1986 . . . The two parties will still run their own separate but co-ordinated campaigns in the constituencies where each happens to lead, but the Alliance campaign will be run jointly.

Despite the confidence expressed, this approach was madness. The Two Davids had to be forever tearing about the country, visiting those ‘television regions’ and yet had to return to London all the time to hold press conferences. Collaboration between Liberals and SDP was so new that there was reason to wonder if it would last even through this joint campaign. The formulation “with Alliance spokesmen as appropriate . . .” would prove particularly difficult for us.

Charles’s brief included health and social security policy, so Alliance strategists decided it was imperative he be in London for the Monday morning press conference on these topics. The problem wasn’t getting to London; there were regular flights from Inverness, and we took one on May 25th, a Sunday. The problem was on Monday, Charles had to leave immediately after the press

conference and fly to the Isle of Skye, as he was scheduled to hold three public meetings that night. He also needed to get there early enough to 'do the shops' in the afternoon and visit people he knew. Skye did have a landing strip, but not one larger planes could land on. The answer, at Alliance expense and as with our Cardiff trip, was to charter a private plane.

Unfortunately, while on the way to London, the Alliance strategy group changed its plans and decided Monday's press conference should not be about health and social security but rather about education. This made Charles's presence in London irrelevant, and him annoyed as he was not his party's education spokesman. Not wanting to completely write off the trip, he tried to find out if he could at least appear on one of the morning television shows produced in London. After a fair number of calls, and jockeying, none of the other Alliance spokespersons were willing to change their own, pre-arranged, interviews. We gave up, had a few drinks, and went out to dinner with some friends – only to meet David Owen, Lord Mackie, and several other Alliance strategists in the same restaurant. They all looked a little dazed. It is perhaps unfair to quote from a letter David Owen wrote to Charles two days before the election: "I think when we look back on this campaign, we will be proud of what we have said and done."

There was an inconvenient footnote for me. When we arrived at the Fair Oaks Airport to get on the chartered plane, the pilot informed us he had been told to expect a single passenger. There was no suitable fuel available on Skye, the runway was short, and should I come on the flight, the pilot would not be able to make it back to the mainland on time, as he had to return to London for a further scheduled flight. So I ended up flying back to Inverness, and meeting up

with Charles the next day back at his Dingwall campaign headquarters. Our fears another campaign volunteer might in the meantime have picked up the car we had left at the Inverness airport, leaving me stranded, fortunately proved unfounded. For the only time during the campaign, I took a little time off and used the car to briefly be a tourist and visit Cawdor Castle.

We were not the only ones to have such problems. Jim Wallace, Alliance MP for Orkney and Shetland, was originally scheduled to speak for the party in Edinburgh, with a return flight to the airport where he'd left a car and his suitcase. But the party changed its plans at the last minute, sending him to Aberdeen instead. Given the time and flight arrangements, this meant he was unable to return to his starting point, which, in order to have a change of clothes, meant he had to go out and buy them afresh in Aberdeen . . .

### Resources

Since being elected in 1983, Charles had spent about £3,500 just on advertisements, and ordinary office expenses in Dingwall ran between £60 and £80 per week. The party donated £2,000 to Charles's campaign, Ross-shire Liberals another £1,250, and £665 were raised at the 'adoption' meeting naming him the party's candidate. Printing alone would cost Charles's campaign \$2,500. The Alliance coffers were quite empty at the end of April, even before the election was called, so various fund-raising efforts had been undertaken, including a notable sale in Skye which netted £1,000.

Even though this all very low budget, the electoral laws mandated that every expenditure of £20 or more had to be reported, one of Sandra's headaches. What mattered far more to the campaign was the time and effort put in by volunteers. Several came up from London for the occasion, including Charles's solicitor, even though some of them were otherwise Labour supporters. Charles's family helped out, Sandra's daughter helped out, local organizers helped out, there was even an American helping in the Dingwall office, and as the campaign entered its last days, Sandra no longer knew what to do with all the willing hands. A significant savings came in the form of cars and houses made available at no cost to Charles and the Alliance. Campaign laws prohibited candidates from treating anyone to meals, to rides to the polling places and the like. The opposite was not true, so it was a great help to the campaign that supporters paid for at least some of Charles's meals and lodging. On the other hand, there was little time available to actually consume meals: Charles survived on Coke, sandwiches, and coffee, and he expected to lose several pounds during the campaign.

## Eve of Poll

### A merry-go-round of meetings

Eve of Poll was an electoral tradition in Ross, Cromarty and Skye. On the evening before the vote, the candidates, in succession and at hourly intervals, addressed packed meetings in the town halls of Alness, Dingwall, Invergordon, and Tain. If you stayed in one of these halls from 7 to 11 PM, as many locals did, you could hear all four candidates in succession. The format was the same as at Charles's public meetings: introduction, speech, questions.

For candidates, this "merry-go-round of meetings," as the Press and Journal called it, was exhausting, not least because they had to race from one meeting to the next. In Charles's case, the itinerary was Invergordon – Dingwall – Alness – Tain, with each town 10 to 20 miles, or up to 20 minutes, from the next. The police exercised restraint in holding candidates to the posted speed limits . . . Candidates knew they would likely face opposition. These were not local meetings attended by sympathetic listeners but occasions where each candidate's supporters turned out in strength to measure their man against his challengers. This had generated one of the most talked-about aspects towards the end of the campaign: Frank Spenser Nairn, the Conservative candidate, had announced he was not going to participate in Eve of Poll!

To many voters, that was a clear admission of weakness. In the Press and Journal two days earlier, Labour candidate Macmillan asked in print what Nairn had to fear, judging that he did "not even deserve the Tory vote unless he is prepared to answer questions from those not sympathetic to his cause" and Nairn

had “done himself no good by advocating such a position.” Two days before that, Nairn had stumbled politically by going into a school and distributing “Vote Tory” stickers, incensing both SNP-supporting parents and the Education Department. Children were not to be manipulated for political purposes.

As it was, Nairn was referred to locally as Frank Spencer – a name he shared with a well-known comedian. Charles’s three challengers had each suggested a different break with tradition, a four-way debate on Eve of Poll. It would be easier for all to have a single, competitive, appearance rather than four public meetings in a single evening. But Charles, the incumbent, didn’t want to play. He had earlier let it be known he considered it premature to hold joint appearances before a general election was called – and once the election date was set, he’d have no time in his schedule. He had no interest in giving his rivals the added publicity an event like this would generate. Yet the consequence of Nairn’s refusal was to leave holes in the Eve of Poll program in each of the towns:

### The Eve of Poll Schedule

	<b>Alness</b> Averon Centre	<b>Dingwall</b> Town Hall	<b>Invergordon</b> Town Hall	<b>Tain</b> Duthac Centre
7 PM		SNP (Gibson)	Alliance (Charles)	Labour (Macmillan)
8 PM	SNP (Gibson)	Alliance (Charles)	Labour (Macmillan)	
9 PM	Alliance (Charles)	Labour (Macmillan)		SNP (Gibson)
10 PM	Labour (Macmillan)		SNP (Gibson)	Alliance (Charles)

## Nairn's Eve of Poll

Frank Spencer Nairn had, in fact, scheduled a public meeting for that evening, but at the National Hotel in Dingwall at 8 PM. That put him in direct competition with Charles, who was to speak at Dingwall Town Hall at the same time. At the National Hotel, Nairn's campaign agent told me the reason Nairn was not appearing at Eve of Poll was because the Isle of Skye had been added to the constituency, but Eve of Poll was a Ross and Cromarty tradition. It was a weak reason unlikely to defuse the criticism, and odd, given how few voters lived on Skye as compared with Ross and Cromarty.

The rally at the hotel must have been a disappointment, though: 100 chairs were set up but only about 30 supporters appeared. Before it began, I talked to one woman about the respective rhetorical capabilities of the candidates, and she flat out said: "you've got to be impressed by Kennedy." At this public meeting, Nairn finally focused on attacking the Alliance:

Proportional representation brings constitutional stalemate, it brings hung parliaments with indecision as the hallmark, weakness and instability. . . I cannot help drawing the conclusion that self-interest, as much as national interest, is behind the Alliance's proposals . . . When, at the beginning of this campaign, David Owen said "the Alliance are just about everybody's second choice," I think he summed it up very neatly. That is exactly where they are going to remain after this general election.

Predicting the electorate would be bored with Kennedy, Nairn closed by saying: "I have been fighting in this campaign because I intend to win, and I will win because I'm going to fight on your behalf in the years ahead at Westminster." One of his

supporters complimented him, left-handedly, for finally “getting a little fire in his belly;” the meeting ended with a rendition of “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow.”

In the end, Nairn bowed to tradition and appeared at his allotted time, 10 PM, and place in Dingwall’s Town Hall. In 1983, Hamish Gray had set an inauspicious precedent at Eve of Poll in Dingwall by rather incautiously opening his remarks with “it’s good to be back in England . . .” That may have contributed to the booing which greeted Nairn when he entered the hall.

Repeated calls of “rubbish!” accompanied Nairn’s opening words, and the rest of his speech featured numerous interjections from his listeners:

The only reason that we were un- . . . we gave the impression of being reluctant to participate in the Eve of Poll meetings was that we felt that their form was outdated and we thought it could be improved upon. I have no hesitation in saying that I am enjoying standing before you here tonight [disbelieving laughter]. Now I say to you . . . that if I am elected tomorrow as your MP [“no chance!”] . . . Ladies and Gentlemen, the Conservative government [“is that what you call it?”] . . . I am prepared to stand here and be judged on the record of the Conservative Party [derisive laughter, hoots, clapping].

Economic prospects not only look good, they look excellent [“for the Tories!” “open your eyes!”] . . . You will have noticed that in my leaflet that I was disappointed, I *was* disappointed [“so we’re we!”] . . .and we must not forget that inward investment has resulted in 43,000 new jobs [“tell us where we can get them!”] and there are 20,000 more jobs in Scotland now [“where?”] and that is a fact! [“none of them in Ross-shire!” “with 2 million unemployed?”].

Many of Mr. Kennedy's policies . . . are flawed or contradictory or both. Take energy and North Sea oil ["England's taken all that!"]. His stance on nuclear energy is nonsense . . . and he is incorrect when he says the Crown Estate Commissioners have planning control ["they own the bloody sea bed!" said to much applause]. We are committed to the development of safe nuclear power ["no such thing!" "have you heard of Chernobyl?" "what'll you do about the waste?"].

The abuse continued during the question period.

Questioner: I got strong, positive answers from Rob Gibson and Mike Macmillan, and a lot of fatuous guff from the real Tory candidate, Charles Kennedy [greeted with much laughter], but I'd like to ask you about the transportation of radioactive, poisonous material through this constituency and the development at Dounreay.

Nairn: If the planning inquiry gives us a positive answer and the Secretary of State approves the planning application ["answer!], then I support the development at Dounreay, because it will be good for the future of the north of Scotland [disbelieving hoots]. You should not overlook that Dounreay is the third-largest employer in the Highlands, and they are very safe jobs ["that we know of!" "it's not a nuclear waste collection plant yet!"].

The final question, which had been meant as a joke when directed to Charles at Gairloch, was not meant nicely at Dingwall: "Mr. Nairn, if you are not elected, are you going to take a seat in the House of Lords?"

## By contrast, Charles

This was not to say Dingwall was a piece of cake for Charles. He spoke an hour before Nairn, entering the hall just before 9 PM to resounding applause. His speech was a relaxed, briefer version of his stump speech, livened by the jokes and pithy remarks he had repeatedly made in the previous weeks – the “wall-to-wall television” remark, the joke about George Gallup and opinion polls, that this election was a referendum about Mrs. Thatcher, that politicians were part of the problem rather than the solution – as well as various jokes against himself. After complimenting the audience on their good turnout (I estimated it to be at least 500), he then did what he had been studiously avoiding in previous public meetings: directly asked those present to vote for the Alliance.

He also commented on his opponents:

It's been fun! But I have to admit tonight that I'm a worried man. You must appreciate that Dingwall is going to be rocked to the foundations by not just one but two Conservative Party meetings on Eve of Poll, and that the Conservative candidate, I see, has said that he intends, if elected, to speak up for the interests of the constituency. And I have to tell you that I'm worried because I strongly suspect the Conservative candidate must be very, very confident of success – he must be saving his vocal cords for when he becomes a Member of Parliament because he's done precious little speaking in the way of public meetings as far as I can see! [considerable applause]. It is sad, in a sense, that the government party, in this constituency, have gone to such outrageous lengths to avoid the public and to answer for eight years of Conservative neglect as far as Ross, Cromarty and Skye, and the Highlands and Islands are concerned, and the black eye that

that party were given in 1983 I hope in 1987 will be knockout punch from this constituency by a resounding vote for the Alliance.

Charles had been worried about the questions which might be asked, given the tradition of “having at the candidates” on the final night. While his questioners did not heckle or treat him with the lack of respect they would soon show Nairn, many also didn’t sound like they were his supporters.

One of the first questions was how, in the event a coalition should be necessary, the Alliance would work with the Tories. Having already answered this particular questioner in Invergordon an hour beforehand, Charles offered a gentle retort: “Douglas, I think you are a very decent guy [laughter] and I think your sense of decency and fair play should lead you to vote for Rob Gibson to help him save his deposit tomorrow night!” [gales of laughter]. A deposit of £500 was needed to get on the ballot, but if insufficient votes were received, that party would lose the money. A ‘loss of deposit’ was thus a costly, humiliating defeat. In the guise of praise, Charles’s retort made the SNP political effort seem frivolous. Charles’s answer to a Tory supporter was similarly adroit:

Q: Is it not true that Mr. Kennedy would find great difficulty in supporting Mrs. Thatcher . . . inasmuch that, in all the divisions in the House last year, for every once he supported the Conservative Party, he supported the Labour Party six times?

Ch: Yes, sir, to both. And I think that given what the record of this government is, voting against them six times as often as I vote for them is about in line with the views of my constituents. [applause]

An older man then asked a rather rambling question:

Q: Mr. Kennedy, I think it would be fair to say your sincerity comes over very well . . .

Ch: Do you mean that? [laughter]

Q: . . .but I've been listening to sincere politicians for three weeks, and Mr. Kinnock the most sincere of the lot. Now we have seen Labour governments, we've seen Conservative governments, and I've seen a lot more than you have, and they've been struggling with this problem of unemployment, economies and all the rest of it since the last war. They still haven't got it right. Now I believe that other politicians are just as sincere as you, because I've never met a politician yet who was not sincere in his belief that he had the answer. I'm not convinced you've got the answer, in fact, to things like unemployment, and I believe that for politicians to talk about curing unemployment is a vanity which is very difficult to forgive in the light of history. Do you believe that if you changed the system, and we had proportional representation that in some way this magic formula would cure the whole unemployment problem tomorrow?

Ch: I am deeply touched by your compliments of sincerity. All political sincerity has to be taken with a government health warning – which is that, by and large, politicians are being insincere when you can see their lips move . . .

Charles was not able to avoid the problem that the Alliance itself was at considerable odds about matters nuclear. Labour categorically rejected nuclear weapons, a position the Liberal Party leaned towards, while the Tories wanted a strong national defense that included such weapons, a position more in line with the SDP. The delay in issuing the Alliance's platform at the beginning of the

campaign had in part been due to this policy difference. A last-minute compromise had papered over the differences, but the artifice involved was wearing thin by the end of the election campaign.

In the Highlands, nuclear weapons issues – the arms race and disarmament, the Trident missiles at Faslane – were often conflated with issues of commercial nuclear power generation and the disposal of nuclear waste – Gurnard Island as a potential site? – including the potential that such waste, in order to process it, might need to be transported through the constituency to Dounreay. This nuclear plant was located at the very northern tip of Scotland, in the constituency represented by Robert MacLennan, Charles's SDP colleague.

Anxiety about Dounreay, Charles noted at one point, varied in direct proportion to how far away you lived from the reactor. Locals who worked at, or near, the plant had few problems with it, unlike those in next-door constituencies, whether the Shetland and Orkney islands to the north and west, or Ross, Cromarty and Skye to the south. In light of the fallout from Chernobyl that had spread over vast distances, residents were increasingly nervous about mere mentions of “nuclear power.” Charles had repeatedly opposed transporting nuclear waste or dumping it somewhere in the Highlands, suggesting vitrification was the answer until such time as science found a better solution, and only favored using Dounreay for reprocessing once independent scientific evaluations of reprocessing and the entire nuclear power industry had been issued.

The technical nature of the issues, Charles's considered and serious responses, and his willingness to give direct answers to questioners were in his

favor. It not help his cause that fellow SDP MP, Robert Maclennan, felt it necessary to support Dounreay for the jobs it provided – as even Frank Spenser Nairn had pointed out. At Eve of Poll, one questioner pointed out that the Alliance was anything but united on these issues. If there are differences, Charles replied, then it was because Alliance politicians were putting the interests of their constituents first – a refreshing aspect of Alliance politics as compared to the major parties, he added. But how will we know which way the Alliance will vote? another audience member asked. To that, Charles responded that each voter had to judge for themselves. A third questioner said:

Q: But Charles, if you go one way and Bob Maclennan goes another way, how can there be a coherent policy on this question?

Ch: If that is the eventuality, we will disagree and split.

A long silence greeted this. Then another audience member stood up and said:

I think we need a truthful answer on this one. The truth is that if Bob Maclennan goes anti-nuclear in Caithness, he knows he's out on his neck. If Jim Wallace goes pro-nuclear in Orkney and Shetland, he's out on his neck. It's their own skins they're saving, not the constituents' [applause].

Charles had given the only answer we could come up with in our discussions at party headquarters, that each MP ultimately looks out for his own constituents. It was a weak stance, and avoided the question of SDP/Liberal coordination in policy. The final questioner was also correct: neither Scots generally nor their MPs spoke with one voice, and it wasn't surprising that MPs seeking re-election tried to reflect their constituents' positions, so as to act as their delegates in London.

Had any of his opponents made more of the internal differences over matters nuclear, not just between SDP and Liberals but between individual MPs of both parties, Charles would have had a much harder time at his public meetings. Only at Eve of Poll were there an appreciable number of critics, far too late to do Charles any real harm. Charles could afford to be gracious to his opponents, and, having learned just before speaking at Dingwall that Frank Spencer Nairn had had a change of heart and would participate in Eve of Poll, said in his closing remarks that “if you do wait till 10 o’clock, don’t give poor Frank too hard a time...”

## Election Day and After

### The process

The polls opened at 7 AM; they would not close until 10 PM. All the candidates felt confident, but they all also nervously awaited the evening count. To my surprise, there seemed to be nothing wrong with candidates going into the polling places and asking the election workers about how good the turnout was. Even the police present did not object.

The ballots were simple. Four names were listed, with the party affiliations beneath each, and were marked by four empty boxes to the right of each name, one of which needed an X if it was to be a valid vote. One of Sandra's duties before the election was to meet with the other campaign agents to decide what other marks – a check? a line? a circle? a comment? – would be considered as a valid vote. That could matter if the vote was close. At least in Dingwall, voting itself took place in portable booths with curtains, the votes themselves deposited in heavy, black, metal boxes.

The vote counting took place in the auditorium of the Dingwall Academy, the local secondary school; it had a stage and several side rooms. These not only held an exhibit of past elections but also rows of chairs for guests who wanted to follow the election in the rest of the country, courtesy of a large-screen television in the corner. Only members of the District Council could move around anywhere in the room, but as a designated "counting agent," I was given an Admission Card to the Counting of Votes allowing me enough access to follow the actual counting of the votes. Our not overly onerous task was to ensure that ballots for "our"

candidate were not mistakenly put onto a pile for a different candidate. Each party had from 8 to 10 such agents.

The counting was done by hand at tables seating four people, mostly younger women, in the middle of the room. It was described from the stage at 10 PM by the Deputy Returning Officer, Mr. Douglas Sinclair:

What we have here are 12 counting tables: each will be under the control of a chief enumerator. The first stage of the count is called the verification. You'll see the sign 'V' on each of those tables, and what that means is that we'll have to check that the number of votes that we find in each ballot box corresponds with the number of votes which the presiding officer indicates that he's issued. There's no counting of the votes for the candidates, there's a simple, straightforward count to establish the number of votes in the ballot box. Once we've done that – and the enumerators will be working in fifties – the completed bundles of votes will go down onto this table here [indicating a table below the stage to his right], which is the count control. The table on this side [pointing to one to his right] is the verification control. The chief enumerator will then take 10 bundles of fifty votes to one of the tables and the sign on the table will be changed from a 'V' to a 'C' so that the counting agents of the candidates will know which tables are counting.

In 1983, the election count was only completed by the next afternoon, so it had been decided to try to speed up the process the next time. The major innovation in 1987 was to start with the verification and count once the first thousand votes had arrived, rather than waiting for all the ballot boxes to reach Dingwall first. Unlike in 1983, this meant pressing the Navy into service to fly the ballot boxes in from Skye and other distant polling places by helicopter. This was

relatively minor: constituencies with many islands, such as Argyll and Bute or the Western Isles, regularly had rather more complicated logistical problems to solve to get all the ballot boxes by air or sea to a single location.

The heavy black ballot boxes, sealed and with large yellow numbers on their sides to identify where they were from, were brought to each table. There they were opened – though one of them required a hacksaw to do so – and their contents emptied out into the center. Counting agents checked that all the “voting papers” had indeed been shaken out of each box. The four enumerators then unfolded the papers and piled them into bundles of 50. As they all needed to be unfolded to be stacked, even before the count proper started you could roughly estimate the percentage for each candidate.

This verification stage was an occasion for much comment. One SNP agent leaned over to me at one table and said: “eh, looks like your man’s doing well here.” It was oddly pleasing to hear that, not just for Charles’s sake, but for what I was being taken for: someone who had contributed substantial time and effort to the campaign and was being rewarded by being issued an Admission Card to the count. Some counting agents had pre-printed sheets on which they kept running tallies during the verification. This was, after all, one of the few ways parties could directly learn which communities were voting for whom. When Charles strolled by another table, an Alliance agent bemusedly remarked to him: “Inver[ness] was bad – what have you done to Inver?” Charles, feigning tired resignation, answered: “so that’s fifty-one public meetings next time!”

The count followed, and once completed, the bundles were brought to the tables Douglas Sinclair had indicated. In a final step, these bundles were then brought to four tables on the stage. It made how the count was going very visible, for the higher the bundles mounted, and the more there were, the better your candidate was doing.

At 1 AM, after three hours of tedium mixed with excitement, there was a sudden announcement: “The candidates please come up to the stage.” Rob Gibson, Michael Macmillan and Charles Kennedy soon appeared, but Frank Spencer Nairn was not with them. Then came the formal announcement:

I, Douglas Sinclair, deputy returning officer for the parliamentary constituency of Ross, Cromarty, and Skye, hereby declare that the total number of votes cast for each of the candidates are as follows:

Robert Mackay Gibson, Scottish National Party	4,492
Charles Peter Kennedy, SDP/Liberal Alliance	18,800 [cheers]
Michael Muirdan Macmillan, Labour Party	7,287
Christopher Frank Spencer Nairn, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	7,490

I declare that Charles Peter Kennedy has been duly elected to serve as the Member of Parliament for the parliamentary constituency of Ross, Cromarty and Skye.

Thank you.

## The victory

Charles stepped up to the microphone, and after congratulating the organizers for having made it possible to announce the result “the right side of one o’clock in the morning,” went on

to thank and congratulate the other political parties, and the candidates in particular, on the campaigns which they have waged, and on, I think, the decorous and dignified way in which this general election has been fought in this constituency [applause]. And could I finally thank, obviously, the 18,000 or so voters who have returned me as the Member of Parliament for this constituency, and the Alliance campaigners in particular, who have worked so hard to produce what really is for us a tremendously encouraging, and in fact delightful, result and we are very grateful to them. Could I say this, as the Member of Parliament returned for this constituency, that I am well aware that although 18,000 or so voted for us, several thousand voted against, and the more important thing I shall conclude tonight is that I’ll offer my best efforts in my continuing determination to represent the interests of all, irrespective of party politics, in the Parliament which will commence in the next week or two. Thank you very much indeed – we are going to dance ‘til dawn!

Michael Macmillan, after thanking his campaign workers for “working not so much for me but for the Labour Party” added a modest, self-deprecating confession:

The last time I appeared on this stage was quite a number of years ago, when I attained the one and only academic achievement from Dingwall Academy that I had, which was Third Prize in History. I’m third again... [laughter, applause]

At this point, Frank Spenser Nairn suddenly appeared in the hall. He climbed onto the stage with the other candidates:

Ladies and Gentlemen, first of all my apologies for my late arrival. We were hit by a deer on the road and had to turn back and start again. I'm very sorry indeed – I congratulate the winner. I exhort our supporters not to be disappointed. We're down but not out, and this is not a safe seat, and we'll always come back  
[scattered applause]

It was one last surprise for Frank Spenser, a candidate unprepared for what this election campaign had demanded of him, his delay not a little ironic, as part of his income was generated from owning a deer farm . . .

Rob Gibson was the least gracious:

All I can say is that we have to be vigilant and we have to be fighting for tomorrow to make sure that Scotland receives what the MP in 1880 said: that the working people of this country will only have their interests best looked-after when we get home rule. That doesn't change and that's what's got to happen in the future. If I was on television as much as the other parties, I think the SNP's case would be much better. I will get that someday, when we get a fair television system...

Reporters crowded around Charles as soon as these little speeches were finished, because it is clear to all that Charles has won a stunning victory. With 49.4% of the vote, he was only 600 votes shy of an absolute majority, an astonishing success considering that only 4 MPs out of 650 had crossed that 50% barrier in 1983. Charles's majority over his nearest rival has swelled from .05% (those 1,704 more votes in 1983) to now just shy of 30% (11,310 more). Though

the electorate was now 3,000 voters larger, his share of the vote had risen by nearly 11 percentage points, from 38.5% (1983) to 49.4% (1987). Left unsaid in the euphoria – one reporter I overheard, and he clearly meant this as a compliment, told Charles it was an “obscene result” – was that if one added all the non-Charles votes together, slightly more than 50% had not voted for him. Even that was a major increase – or decrease: in 1983, it had been 62%.

Reporter: How are you actually feeling?

Ch: Delighted!

Reporter: You look as though you’re just going to fall down, actually!

Ch: I’m feeling very tired, very, very tired. I mean we did 50 public meetings, which I think was more than twice as many as anybody else, and we travelled I don’t know how many thousands of miles, but “exhausted but exhilarated” is the most cogent way I can try and put it.

By my tally (see Appendix), Charles was accurate: Labour and SNP candidates had held about 20 public meetings, the Conservative only seven. Put differently, on 12 days of the campaign, the Labour and SNP candidates had held one or two public meetings, while on 12 days of the campaign, Charles held three or even four public meetings. It was the intensity of Charles’s effort that was striking: he was simply making double the effort than his rivals to reach out. Even if 16 of his meetings attracted less than 20 voters, Charles left the impression he really did want to meet as many people as he could in as many places in the constituency as he could manage. Residents knew what efforts he had made in the past four years, and knew the effort he was making in the campaign, and also knew his rivals were not trying half, or even less, as much.

## 1988 assessment

For the Alliance generally, the election was a disaster. Of the four politicians who had originally created the SDP, only David Owen was able to keep his seat. The Alliance overall lost five of its 27 seats. In Scotland, the SDP was reduced to Charles and Robert Maclennan; the Liberals were able to increase their representation from five to seven seats. Even the SNP was dispirited, losing the two seats they had had, though gaining three others. The victory was Margaret Thatcher's, and while her majority slipped from 144 to 101 seats, she was the first British leader in 160 years to be elected to a third consecutive term as Prime Minister. The Labour Party, which did particularly well in Scotland, was able to increase its vote share, though only from 28% to 33%.

Charles's round of public meetings and other activities was not unusual for a candidate, though clearly more intense than in many constituencies. The introduction of electronic gadgets and increased media coverage seems to have changed the overall conduct of campaigning little, other than to lead many commentators to remark on how much more attention was being paid to party leaders than in the past, or in other words, how much more American it seemed.

An election campaign can be seen as the rational pursuit of an objective: to get elected. An election campaign can also be experienced as riddled by events and utterances hindering actually getting elected. I experienced both in my time with Charles's campaign. A more dispiriting view is to see campaigns as futile exercises, and not just for the losing candidates. In many constituencies, candidates have little to no influence, no matter what they do to convince voters.

One BBC/Gallup poll found more than 80% of respondents in this election venturing that they had decided how they would vote even before the election campaign began. Many public meetings I attended were exercises in preaching to the converted, or more charitably, were held to mobilize the base of supporters, encouraging them to vote and to convince others to vote.

Still, given the popularity of Thatcher and her party, along with the fact that in 1983 he had won a constituency held by a Tory for the previous 13 years, what explains the success of a Charles Kennedy, representing a tiny party with a paltry number of seats in parliament? For one, there is the advantage of incumbency, though the kinds of perks this brings in the U.S., such as free franking privileges, did not exist in the UK. Incumbency worked to Charles's advantage because he had conscientiously, and adroitly, worked for the benefit of his constituents and thus built a personal following. The example of the woman in the street who said she would support him because he had visited her institutionalized son is a good example. Such dedication to constituents lay behind the assertion that Highlanders "voted for the man and not for the party" – and a perceived lack of such dedication had cost Charles's predecessor in office his seat.

It also helped that there were examples of MPs in the immediate area who showed Charles how it could be done, in particular the 25 years both Sir Russell and Bob Maclennan had served. They had acted as his political mentors and provided campaign role models as well. Charles hence understood his task was to be present – numerous trips to the constituency since 1983 to attend local events and 'surgeries', meaning holding office hours in Dingwall – and otherwise available, including providing a free phone line to his London office. This was not

at all common for MPs, given their salaries. It also meant a continuous need to be visible, which meant he had to make sure his doings, including what he said or did in parliament, were reported back home to his constituents regularly, and not just during an election. It was amusing, during the 1987 campaign, to discover that this meant he wrote all his own press releases.

As Rob Gibson so ungraciously pointed out in his concession speech, due to his exposed position in the Alliance, Charles also had considerably greater media exposure than any of his competitors during the election campaign. Had Rob Gibson been vice-president of the SNP, his media exposure might have rivalled Charles's. The disadvantage for Charles was that there were simply too few elected SDP representatives for the Alliance to leave him to just campaign in his constituency; it meant time-consuming trips outside of it. That he was also very adroit in dealing with questions from the media, both broadcast and press, further worked to Charles's advantage.

Charles's anti-Maggie message was one his constituents wanted to hear, but not in the terms put by the Labour Party, which was seen as pro-socialist and neutralist. Yet as the Alliance promoted policies which seemed fairly Thatcherite at times, and constituents had elected Hamish Gray, a Conservative, several times, the "Charles is the real Tory" remark heard at Nairn's appearance at Eve of Poll had some bite to it. It was not the worst strategy on Charles's part to sound, at times, like a Tory while still denouncing Thatcher. The Conservative Party candidate, Frank Spencer Nairn, did not have this luxury.

One should not under-estimate the power of Charles's delivery. He was extremely fluent, very good at reading audiences and at sensing and then articulating what bothered or moved them, at defusing hostile questions, at poking fun at himself, and at making speeches where, unless he was very tired, he rarely stumbled. None of his competitors came close. Labour candidate Macmillan was even more local than Charles, but he emphasized this so much in his appearances that it overwhelmed the aura of competence for the job he was trying to project. SNP candidate Gibson was so keen on bringing about an independent Scotland that he seemed to forget the job he was applying for was to represent individuals living there. And Conservative candidate Nairn was so verbally maladroit that many dismissed him just for that reason. Considering that Charles said the same thing around 50 times in 18 days, his performance during the campaign was a tour-de-force, and one of endurance. Strong, popular candidates can compensate for representing a weak party – but weak, unpopular individuals seemed, at least here, to make otherwise strong parties weaker.

### 2023 postscript

Charles Kennedy died in 2015, aged 55, having represented his constituency for 32 years. Though the constituency boundaries changed, becoming Ross, Skye & Inverness West in 1997, and then Ross, Skye & Lochaber after 2005, he was re-elected six times. Charles had long had difficulties controlling his consumption of alcohol – as one obituary put it, it was his friend, his prop and his curse – and that weakness had forced him to resign as Liberal Democrat leader in 2006, though he

had led his party to its best-ever election result the year before. As one can see from the narrative here, alcohol was omnipresent during his election campaigns.

The tributes were effusive, Nick Robinson of the BBC calling him a genial, witty, bon viveur, but also one with a sharp, tactical brain – and principled for opposing the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. Tony Blair, of the Labour Party, called him a lovely and deeply committed public servant, great company and with a lively and inventive mind. Iain Duncan Smith, a former Tory leader, praised him as a courteous friend and adversary, and always good-humored at the most difficult times. And his long-time friend Alastair Campbell praised him as having had humanity in every vein and every cell.

In 2001, Charles won Ross, Skye and Inverness West with an absolute majority (54%). In 2005, Charles won Ross, Skye and Lochaber with an even larger majority (59%). In 2010, he was re-elected, again with a majority (53%). But in 2015, he was swept out of office in the landslide election that saw 56 of Scotland's 59 seats taken by the SNP, in the aftermath of a 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. Though that referendum failed, its 85% turnout was the highest seen in Scotland since mass voting was introduced after World War I. The political mobilization it engendered would add 60,000 members to the SNP within months of this referendum. In defeat, Charles said:

It has been the greatest privilege of my adult and public life to have served, for 32 years, as the Member of Parliament for our local Highlands and Islands communities. I would particularly like to thank the generation of voters, and then some, who have put their trust in me to carry out that role and its responsibilities.

Charles's electoral defeat was on May 15, 2015, and he died just a few weeks later, on June 1. It is difficult not to see these two events as causally connected, though the postmortem examination confirmed that the proximate cause of death was a major hemorrhage, "a consequence of his battle with alcoholism."