

## RCPolitics Volume 9 Issue1

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### New Administration

Alex Salmond has restructured the Scottish Executive away from having ministers and deputy ministers to instead having 5 Cabinet Secretaries operating at more strategic level with ministers working under them. Five Strategic Objectives (one for each Cabinet Secretary) will be the foundation of the new administration’s actions. These are headed as:

*Wealthier and fairer Healthier*

*Safer and stronger*

*Smarter*

*Greener*

Increasingly the term Scottish Government rather than Scottish Executive is being used as emphasis is placed on expanding devolved powers. The Cabinet will lead five separate ‘directorates’ under which civil service departments will be managed. Each directorate has a Director General, the equivalent of Head of Department for that particular branch of government.

The structure within Parliament also changes with a reduction in the number of committees from 16 to 15 although the membership of the Standards Committee and Subordinate Legislation Committee is identical, effectively meaning 14 committees.

The narrow margin of victory for the SNP puts some pressure on the party in manning the committees due to the number of its members involved directly as ministers or Cabinet secretaries who do not hold committee places.

The Green party have a prized convenership of the Transport and Climate Change Committee thanks to their agreement to work closely with the SNP.

Initial weeks have focused on organising both the Executive and parliament with announcements of several popular initiatives such as the reprieve on hospital closures and the end of the student graduate tax.

The breakdown of seats gives the SNP an advantage of 1 over the Labour party and a minority in the 129 seated Parliament. Legislation will no doubt be more difficult to pass and may allow for improved scrutiny of bills and government policy. Opposition parties also look set to use their combined strength to propose alternative legislation.

A report issued by the Executive gives its perspective of what they have achieved in their first 100 days in office. It can be found at [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications)

## **Sectarianism Priority**

Minister for Community Safety, Fergus Ewing has made the campaign against sectarianism a key area for future work. At an event instigated by the minister, Alex Salmond addressed key workers in the field asserting that Church and faith groups were not part of the problem but part of the solution to tackling sectarianism. He applauded the work of his predecessor in tackling the issue and vowed to build on that work. What stamp the new government put in the campaign remains to be seen. Mr Ewing has been spending time with groups working in the area of improving community relations to assess their current activities and plan for future initiatives.

A challenge for people of faith will be to ensure that the message of Alex Salmond is widely recognised, to ensure Churches are not blamed for the actions of those who never darken a church doorway.

## **Human Tissue and Embryo Bill**

### **What do they plan to do?**

The Human Tissue and Embryo Bill will permit scientists to create embryos by mixing animal and human cells. Such embryos are known as hybrids. The bill is presently in draft format.

The proposal will allow more embryos to be created and then destroyed to obtain their stem-cells for research. Stem cells are those cells which retain the ability to change in to different tissue types making them an exciting prospect for scientists to work on to develop treatments or simply to observe how they operate. So far no successful treatments from embryonic stem cells have been found. Stem cells can be obtained ethically from other sources and are known as adult stem-cells. These stem cells have been used successfully to treat more than 70 different illnesses.

The bill will remove the need to consider the presence of a father for a baby to be born through IVF treatment.

It will create a new Regulatory Authority for Tissue and Embryos (RATE) which will replace the existing regulators the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority and the Human Tissue Authority.

The bill can be amended to cover abortion issues. Abortion advocates are already proposing that nurses should be permitted to carry out abortions, that only one doctor should be required to approve instead of two and that free access to abortion should be a right for the first trimester of pregnancy.

### **Points to remember:**

Advance in science is good but science is a tool at the service of humanity. Many tools can be used for good or evil and people should benefit from the good but be protected from the evil. The prospect of great advancements with stem cells has been greatly hyped and this has seduced many in to supporting research which destroys human life. The end does not justify the means.

Adult Stem cells can be used more successfully than embryonic stem cells. Adult stem cells can be obtained readily from umbilical cord blood.

Life is a gift not a mere commodity and respecting the origins of life protects this gift – otherwise life becomes subject to the manipulation and domination by man and leads to eugenics.

An embryo is a human life at its earliest stages. All human life should be protected. To set arbitrary limits on who is recognised as a person undermines all human dignity. The criteria about who is to be recognised as a person can be manipulated by the powerful to oppress the weak: think of Jews, slaves, aborigines.

Why use controversial and morally questionable techniques which are failing to produce results when non-controversial techniques from adult stem cells has produced great success in treating many illnesses?

Creating hybrids between animals and humans is a step too far. How do we know the nature of the being to be created or what moral status it should have? How human does it have to be to have human rights?

Natural distaste (the yuk factor) for mixing species reflects a natural intuition that a moral boundary is being crossed.

### **The Role of Committees**

Committees play a big role in the Scottish Parliament. They scrutinise legislation, conduct enquiries, gather evidence and generally hold the Scottish Executive to account.

There are different kinds of committees. The eight Mandatory Committees such as Audit, Equal Opportunities and Finance are established at the beginning of each session. The Subject Committees, currently seven in number, such as Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, and the Health and Sport Committee, are also established at the beginning of each parliamentary session. There are also occasional Private Bill Committees. Committees now usually consist of 7 or 8 members (although the Public Petitions Committee has 9) led by a Convenor. They are also cross-party in membership in proportion to the party size in parliament.

A large part of the work of a Committee consists of taking evidence and gathering views. It can often be accessed by those with legitimate interest in a particular issue or a proposed Bill. Committee enquiries cover a wide range of issues and result normally in the production of a report which is published on the Parliament website. For example, between May 2003 and November 2005, the Committees conducted 84 such inquiries covering issues as diverse as youth justice, disability, rural development and the arts.

One of the key roles of Committees is to examine and consider proposed legislation that has been introduced to the Scottish Parliament. Generally, Bills require to complete three stages to become an Act of the Scottish Parliament.

At **stage 1**, a Bill is referred to the Committee with the relevant remit (the "Lead Committee"). Parliament may also refer the Bill to other Committees (Secondary Committees) which have an interest, for example if it has Equal Opportunities implications or the Finance Committee. At this stage, the Lead Committee will make recommendations about whether Parliament should agree to the Bill's principles.

At **stage 2**, the Lead Committee will scrutinise the Bill in detail, line by line. At this stage, the Lead Committee can consider any proposed amendments put forward by any MSP as long as the proposal is consistent with the principles of the Bill. The bill is thus changed and refined by the committee and when finished it is presented for a **stage 3** debate before the whole parliament.

Committees can also make proposals for legislation in the form of Committee Bills. Four such Bills were considered by the Scottish Parliament in its first six years.

The Public Petitions Committee considers Petitions raised by individuals or groups and may decide to refer them to other Committees for consideration.

Committee work can be observed live on the parliament website or members of public can attend in person if they book ahead by phoning 0131 348 5000.

**'Let's Talk' call from New FM**

The Scottish Executive (or Government) has launched what it calls a 'National Conversation' inviting people to give their views on Scotland and their perspective on what kind of Scotland they wish to live in. In particular it seeks views on support for a referendum on independence for Scotland. The notion of such an exercise raises many issues worth pondering. Is it possible to 're-invent' a country? Can the words of contributors have any great impact on the direction of Scottish politics and society?

Detractors in other parties question the merit of spending public money on such an exercise, questioning whether a minority SNP administration has the power to deliver on findings that may come from the consultation and especially in regards to any discussion about independence which is poorly supported in opinion polls and favoured by a minority of parliamentarians.

For good reason, the Catholic Church's social teaching points out that institutional and constitutional issues are not matters for the Church to teach on other than to promote principles that ensure justice and fairness. The choice of government structure and the form of the state belong to the realm of politics rather than the realm of the Church.

On the other hand the Pope and his predecessor have been gravely worried about some of the underpinning values which have been absorbed in to the prevailing ideas of democracy in the Western world. Most notable have been the pleas for a re-evaluation of moral relativism which is now taken for granted as the basis for informing government policies and action. Issues around constitutional arrangements and economic prosperity cannot be detached from the status of the human person and the corresponding rights of the person in society. In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was seen as a triumph for establishing rights that had to be recognised by every nation. It came in the aftermath of the Nuremberg trials which concluded that there are limits to the authority of governments. In recent times this lesson has been forgotten and some human rights have been eroded. Governments again see themselves as the final arbiters of what is right and wrong and feel free to redefine the boundaries of human rights as long as these can get voted through their respective parliaments. Campaign groups now see the human rights label as a useful means of getting their special interests accepted and enforced in law.

Ministers of the new Scottish Government have made it clear they see this as a chance to hear a full range of views on all aspects of Scottish life. The First Minister in launching the consultation stated "I respect the role of organisations like churches, business groups, voluntary organisations and others across civic Scotland who reflect a distinct voice on these matters and bring wisdom and expertise".

An opportunity to 'converse' with our nation's leaders is perhaps then a useful time to draw their attention to the need for a firm foundation for values which should inform their decision making. Catholics will have a variety of views on Scottish independence and on the structures and workings of democracy and it will be good for those views to be contributed where possible in public discourse but more importantly it is necessary to be united in supporting norms of right and wrong which cannot be changed in regard to the value of human life, the natural rights of the family, the right to work and the role of parents in educating their children, the means to support one's own family, the right to freedom of belief and expression etc.

The National Conversation has its own website at [www.anationalconversation.com](http://www.anationalconversation.com)

### **In Brief**

Westminster's Science and Technology Committee is holding an inquiry into scientific developments relating to the Abortion Act 1967 and plan to complete their work by the end of October. It is possible to submit views but the committee has stated that it will not look at

moral or ethical aspects of abortion. In a perfect example of how morality can be swept to the side in public policy the committee wish to examine definitions of foetal viability, abnormality, risks of abortion in comparison to pregnancy and delivery, the need for two doctors to sign approval of abortion, the safety of allowing nurses to perform abortions and evidence of adverse health outcomes from abortion or restriction of access to abortion. Whether scientific advances should be put to the purpose of killing human beings is of no concern to the committee. The committee can be e-mailed at [scitechcom@parliament.uk](mailto:scitechcom@parliament.uk) and the deadline for this inquiry is Monday 3 September 2007 .

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The proposed privately run prison in Bishopbriggs has been suspended by the new Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Kenny McAskill. Mr McAskill made clear his wish to have prisons run by the public sector rather than by private companies. The existing private prison in Falkirk will continue as will the project for another privately run prison in Addiewell due to the financial implications of reversing these situations.

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The House of Lords Communications Committee have launched an inquiry into media ownership and the news.

The Committee will focus on changes in the way people access news, developments in the way news is provided and how concentrated media ownership affects the balance and diversity of news in a democracy. The Committee will make a further call for evidence on a second stage of the inquiry later in the year when it will consider the concentration of media ownership, cross media ownership and the regulation framework. Further information for submitting evidence on the inquiry Can be found at:

[http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary\\_committees/hlcommunications.cfm](http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/hlcommunications.cfm)

### **Downing Street Changes**

New Prime Minister Gordon Brown has given an outline of his plans for new legislation. Normally released in the Queen's speech in November, Mr Brown wishes to allow more time for consultation and has given notice of 23 new bills dealing with a range of issues including constitutional reform, research on human embryos, pensions, terrorism, European finance, immigration and climate change. The Prime Minister has also made his mark in the civil service by scrapping three Whitehall departments and creating three new ones in their place. The Department of Trade and Industry, the Department for Education and Skills and the Deputy Prime Minister's Office are now replaced by a new Department for Children, Schools and Families, a Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulation and a Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills.

He has of course changed the composition of the Government Cabinet. Des Browne now takes over the role of Secretary of State for Scotland in addition to his continuing role as Secretary of State for Defence.

Another Scot, Alistair Darling takes on the role vacated by Gordon Brown as Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Former Secretary of State for Scotland Douglas Alexander takes over as Secretary of State for International Development.

### **Consultations**

<b>Title of Current Consultation</b>	<b>End Date</b>
Proposal to Revise Directive 92/34 on the marketing of fruit plant propagating material and fruit plants	13/11/2007
Adults with Incapacity Regulations	08/11/2007
Better Health, Better Care: A Discussion Document	12/11/2007
Code of Practice - Station Infrastructure to meet the needs of Disabled People	09/11/2007
Code of Practice - Station Infrastructure to meet the needs of Disabled People	09/11/2007
Social Content of the Scottish House Condition Survey	28/09/2007
The Disposal of Land by Local Authorities (Scotland) Regulations 200(7) - draft (second consultation)	19/10/2007
Consultation on the proposed EU Soil Framework Directive and initial Regulatory Impact Assessment	20/10/2007
Strategic Development Planning Authorities: Designation Orders and Statutory Guidance	26/10/2007
Abolition of the Graduate Endowment Fee	07/09/2007
Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (Scotland) Regulations 2007	05/10/2007
Transport & Works (Scotland) Act 2007 - Secondary Legislation	31/08/2007
Draft Glasgow Commonwealth Games Bill	21/09/2007
Environmental Impact Assessment of Reserved Matters Applications	19/09/2007
Consultation on Draft Regulations Setting out Proposed Relevant Offences Under the Act & the Proposed Form of Statement of Reasons	21/09/2007
Quality Meat Scotland Order 2007 Consultation	13/09/2007
Delivering for Mental Health: Mental Health and Substance Misuse	13/09/2007
Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005 consultation on draft regulations fees and vessels	17/09/2007
Drug misuse and dependence – guidelines on clinical update 2007	31/08/2007

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