

Sentinel Interview

HAPPY AT THE HELM

SCOTLAND'S CHIEF MINISTER OF STATE TALKS TO THE SENTINEL ABOUT UNEMPLOYMENT, GROWTH INDUSTRIES, NORTH SEA OIL, URBAN AID, THE REGIONAL AND DISTRICT COUNCILS AND HIS FUTURE.

The Scottish Office is 100 years old this year. It employs 9,700 civil servants and has a budget of £6.9 billion which makes it the fifth largest spending department in the British Government. It's chief minister, the Secretary of State for Scotland, is George Younger. Son of an hereditary peer, Viscount Younger of Leckie, and heir to a brewery fortune Mr Younger is 53 years old and Conservative Member of Parliament for Ayr.

He is a member of the Cabinet and directly responsible for the operation of all the Departments making up the Scottish Office. As Secretary of State for Scotland, Mr Younger has resided over increasing unemployment. Recently Treasury imposed cuts reduced the Scottish budget by £30 million in real terms. This was followed by a £90 million cut in regional aid which will have further consequences for business and employment. There were calls for his resignation and criticism from all sides of industry, including the CBI.

Further cuts were made necessary when Sir Keith Joseph recanted over cuts in student grants to one of the wealthier sections in our society. Mr Younger had to contemplate further cuts in his budget at a time when various groups were calling for increased spending to combat unemployment and a decaying housing stock. There were jibes that the Scottish Secretary was not even consulted on these new cuts by his English colleagues in the Cabinet.

This Mr Younger claimed was not the case. "We have discretion to alter spending priorities to meet Scottish needs which can often be very different from English needs." And although he agrees "It is quite true that the rise in unemployment has been substantial", he argues that, in relative terms, Scotland has fared somewhat better than other areas of the U.K. Whereas in 1979 the Scottish unemployment rate was only exceeded by that of Northern England and Northern Ireland, now "the Scottish rate is also below that for Wales, the North

West and the West Midlands". Whether this movement up or down the league table of unemployment gives any comfort to those actually out of work is another question.

How then will the problem of unemployment be solved? Like the other members of the Cabinet Mr Younger believes that employment will be created by supporting business men pursuing profits "we have sought to encourage enterprise wherever it is found, and to provide a more stable framework within which business can flourish". He sees one ray of hope in the so-called sunshine industries and believes "The very rapid growth of the electronics industry in Scotland is particularly exciting: it represents precisely the kind of modern high technology industry which Scotland needs to develop."

The development of North Sea Oil and Gas is another enterprise Mr Younger believes has helped employment in Scotland. On his calculation, in 1984, "the total - direct and indirect - employment impact was around 100,000 jobs. This amounts to around 5 per cent of employment in Scotland". And although it could not protect us from recession "the U.K. is clearly better off as a result of North Sea oil than we would have been without it."

Once the rigs are in place the extraction of oil and gas is not a highly labour intensive enterprise and some people would argue that the revenue from its sale (annual tax receipts from North Sea production are now around £12 billion) could be used for capital investment to create employment. But this is not an argument which finds much favour with Mrs Thatcher who much prefers the idea of tax cuts. Mr Younger follows the same line "these revenues from North Sea oil have been used to reduce the burdens of taxation on industry and individuals alike, as part of the Government's policy to create a favourable climate for industrial growth".

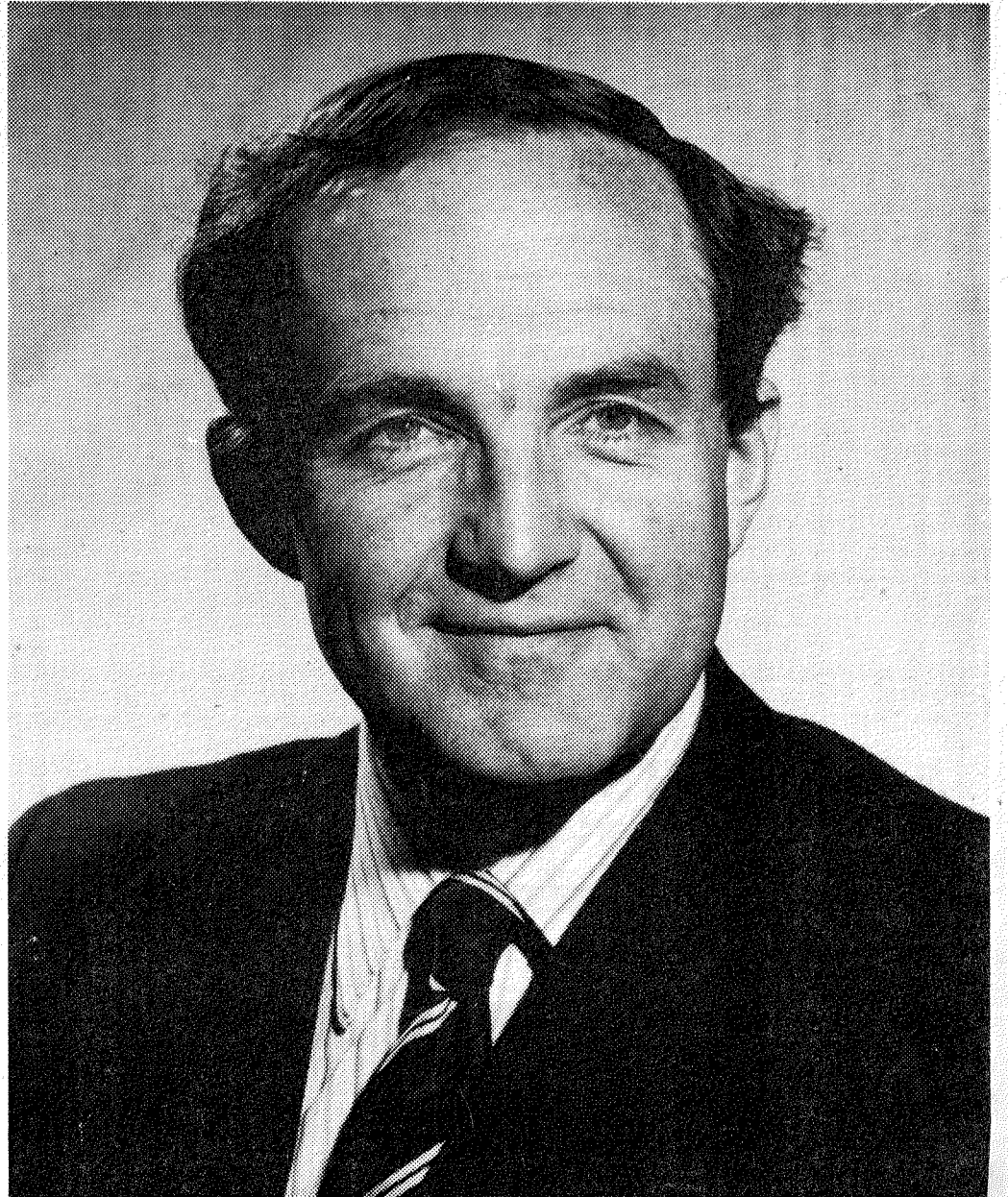
Mr Younger does believe, however, in supporting employment in areas such as

Wester Hailes through the urban aid programme, and announced last year "our renewed commitment to the urban programme. In fact, my officials have advised Lothian Region of my agreement for a further year's grant, to October 1985, for the Community Workshop in Wester Hailes. This should enable the Sentinel to become commercially viable by the end of the grant period." Although this is not quite correct, as only a small part of the Sentinel's costs come from urban aid; the grant is much needed and we hope it will be continued.

Mr Younger went on "In 1985-86 the £29 million which will be available will be spent on the best projects in the most needy areas". He intimated that both the Lothian Region and Edinburgh District Council "have identified Wester Hailes as one of the priority areas for future urban programme projects". However, "Projects seeking an extension are of course in competition for the same funds as new projects".

Both the Lothian Regional and Edinburgh District Councils have recently been critical of the amount of cuts Mr Younger has asked them to make. Even Brian Meek, the Conservative convener of the Lothian Regional Council, thought that the cuts the Scottish Office was asking for were unreasonable. Mr Younger acknowledged that "Lothian's expenditure has been reducing over recent years and I congratulate them on that", but it will have to cut further "as part of the Government's overall policy of reducing public expenditure ... to free resources for the wealth-producing sector of the economy on which the country's continued recovery depends".

I put it to Mr Younger that the hard line he was taking with the Lothian Region is liable to lose the Conservative Party the forthcoming Regional Elections. He did not agree. "I am attempting to be a responsible guardian of the taxpayers' and ratepayers' interests ... local councils should not be allowed to write blank cheques on their ratepayers'



bank accounts". Furthermore, he believes "Such is the fairness of the Lothian electorate that I expect them to reward the Conservative group in 1986 by returning them as a majority administration".

Nor did the Secretary of State agree when I pointed out that Paul Martin, the leader of the Conservative group on the District Council, had praised the Labour administration (on the programme 'Seven Days'). Mr Younger was unequivocal "Young and inexperienced they might be and they may have shown vigour in their cruel attacks on some of the age-old popular traditions which were part of Edinburgh's distinctive character, but Edinburgh District Labour group cannot be described as professional".

Mr Younger believes that the people of Edinburgh have quickly become disenchanted with the Labour administration. "The voters delivered their verdict on Labour in two by-elections in October. In both wards the Labour vote was slashed: indeed in Murrayfield it fell below three figures". He hoped that "the Labour group will learn a lesson from these results and will adopt a more responsible and moderate approach to the management of the city".

However, the stage seems set for a major confrontation between Mr Younger and the Labour District Council. The Council believes the Secretary of State for Scotland is discriminating against them by the level of cuts he is asking them to make, and by his refusal to let them borrow or raise more capital from the rates to finance housing repairs in areas like Wester Hailes. Whereas Mr Younger believes the council should

raise revenue from increased rents and cuts from other areas; the council is committed to freezing rents and raising the revenue it needs, to carry out the pledges on which it was elected, by increasing the rates.

But that is a battle for the future. What of Mr Younger's personal political future? There has been some recent speculation in the Sunday Times - where he was referred to as "king of Scotland" - that Mr Younger "the greatest unsung

success in the Cabinet" might be promoted in 1985. It was further asserted that if he had his choice he would prefer Defence. However, he was quite ready to dismiss any speculation about a move, "Someone is always 'tipping' me to move to another Ministry but I am very happy where I am. The Scottish Secretaryship is one of the best jobs in the government and it would be hard to find one that was more important and more interesting."

By Colin Bartie

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