

BOOM-TIME BECKONS?

Some are better placed than others to benefit from the election result, explains **Alastair Ross**

A new government, a hung Parliament where every vote counts, a major civil service restructure – all the ingredients look in place for a PA boom in Scotland. So are the major London names stampeding over Hadrian's Wall to set up shop on Edinburgh's Royal Mile? Well, not quite yet.

Anyone with experience of lobbying, or explaining, minority governments should make their way here ASAP, as everyone else is learning as we go under the new regime. But beyond that niche, is there scope to generate significant new business on the Scottish scene?

A similar public affairs boom was predicted in 1999, and indeed a rash of new entrants created a Scottish market where previously there had been next to nothing. My own firm founded a public-policy practice, London agencies rushed to open offices in Edinburgh, indigenous PR companies expanded their offerings to public affairs, and even some journalists jumped the fence to set up in consultancy.

Different to Westminster

However, the nature of the devolution settlement, with almost all economic powers and business-rated legislation reserved to Westminster, meant that after the initial interest the corporate community saw limited relevance for the Scottish Parliament to their business, and were less inclined to take advice on it. The view from London was that for many agencies Scotland simply doesn't offer sufficient margins to justify a presence there.

If the Scottish National Party administration extends Scotland's powers then there will be even greater opportunities – but that's a major constitutional change that relies on the co-operation of Westminster, and so will take longer than first minister Alex Salmond's much-vaunted 'first 100 days' to achieve.

The opportunities in Scotland lie in recognising the differences here and capitalising on them. We have a truly multi-party system where you need to carry four or five different party opinions, a more open Parliament and civil service that is easier to access (and yet can lack the knowledge and experience public affairs can provide), and an opportunity for clients to use Scotland as a 'test-bed' for new ideas or initiatives at that level, before rolling them out at a UK level.

Scottish-based practitioners prosper by understanding and explaining how organisations should approach MSPs differently to how they would do in Westminster. The lack of UK media coverage on Scottish affairs post-devolution also helps this, as many people beyond the River Tweed feel they know very little about what happens here now.

'Third sector' flourishing

Another fertile area for public affairs is the 'third sector', which has flourished under devolution as organisations whose interests are devolved to Scotland – such as health, education and the environment – have built highly effective lobbying operations.

Perhaps the most celebrated act of the Scottish Parliament is the ban on smoking in public places. The driving forces behind this were not the government or the opposition politicians who first raised it in the Chamber, but Cancer Research UK, Macmillan Cancer Relief (as was then) and ASH Scotland, who recognised the opportunity to do things differently in Scotland and lobbied long and hard for such a ban.

Another formidable lobby is the environmental one. Barely a major development consultation goes by without detailed and high-profile submissions from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace. Such organisations lobby MSPs on a regular ba-



Scottish PA market: many in London believe it is too difficult to make money selling lobbying services north of the border

sis, and yet are not held in the same regard as 'commercial' lobbyists or those who represent the business sector.

The SNP and lobbying

So what of the new government's attitude to PA? The SNP was traditionally wary of corporate interests and PA professionals and there are few PA firms with strong SNP credentials or staff links, in contrast to Labour, the Tories and even the Lib Dems. This has improved recently, but a watchful eye remains trained on the 'lobbyists'.

First minister Salmond's closest media adviser, Kevin Pringle, spent three years with Centrica handling comms for Scottish Gas, while his fellow special adviser Stephen Noon served as press secretary to Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor. So the administration appreciates how PA works. It was no co-incidence that one of Salmond's first major visits following his appointment was to ScottishPower to meet its Spanish parent group's CEO, sending a clear message that this SNP administration is open to business.

Scotland's opportunities require an investment in getting the right people, knowledge and skills on board. Practitioners with experience of minority government or an SNP membership card should do well, but it takes a lot more to flourish.

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