

National Records Office – Cabinet papers released from 2003

There is a particular hush in the air in the National Records Office which is housed in the grand building opposite The Balmoral when journalists were invited in last Friday to read the newly released Scottish Cabinet papers.

The rules are fairly strict. You are only allowed either a computer or a pencil and paper, and bags are left in lockers downstairs.

But all of the journalists there were being given special access to the newly released 125 files comprising 20,000 pages of official cabinet papers from 2003. The papers will be available to the general public from 3 January 2019 in the Historical Search Room.

At the time Jack McConnell was First Minister and Jim Wallace was Deputy First Minister in what was only the second Scottish Government since devolution. Nicol Stephen was Minister for Transport as this was a coalition government between Labour and the LibDems. There was a 48% turnout for the Scottish Parliamentary election on 1 May and Robin Harper along with six other Green MSPs were elected.

In Downing Street Tony Blair reigned supreme and George W Bush was US President. The only name on the list of world leaders which remains the same is Vladimir Putin. John Swinney led the SNP and David McLetchie who was newly elected Edinburgh

Pentlands MSP led the Scottish Tories. Nicola Sturgeon was Shadow Secretary for Health and then Justice.

David Davis was Shadow Home Secretary and called for the return of the death penalty for those convicted of the worst murders.

This was the year that Johnny Cash the country singer died and the MTV awards were held in Edinburgh. Oh, and England won the Rugby World Cup – who can forget Jonny Wilkinson's last minute kick?

In March that year Livingston MP and former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook resigned over the Iraq War which began with a joint invasion of the country by the UK and the US.

It was in 2003 when Andrew Gilligan reported on BBC Radio 4 that the government knew that their information about weapons of mass destruction was false. His source David Kelly gave evidence to a House of Commons Select Committee in July that year and was found dead near his home a couple of days later. A public enquiry followed.

The beatification of Mother Teresa began – part of the process to have her declared a saint which eventually happened in 2016. Concorde flew commercially for the last time, before coming to rest at the National Museum of Flight at East Fortune (or at least one of them did!).

This is a general release of cabinet papers after fifteen years in terms of Freedom of Information legislation which makes everything seem like very recent history. And of course it is – although it appears that some of the discussions were similar to those being held at Holyrood right now.

Holyrood itself was still in the process of being built, giving rise to much discussion over the escalation of the costs.

We spoke with Bruno Longmore and Neil Miller from National Records of Scotland about some of the important papers now on general release.

Alistair Darling MP (now Lord Roulanish) represented the Edinburgh South West constituency and in 2003 was also the newly appointed Secretary of State for Scotland in succession to Helen Liddell.

Former MP and MSP Malcolm Chisholm was Minister for Health and Community Care and Jeane Freeman was a Senior Special Adviser in attendance. Ms Freeman is now Health Secretary and Mr Chisholm has retired from politics.

On 17 December one of the cabinet meetings minuted that Ross Finnie was in Brussels for the fishing talks. Plus ça change...



Alistair Darling MP for Edinburgh South West and erstwhile UK Chancellor and leader of the Better Together campaign

photographed in 2014 during the Scottish Independence referendum

Alistair Darling had just held a meeting with the First Minister Jack McConnell to discuss some particularly Scottish business.

Here is what was recorded at the following Cabinet meeting :

10. Cabinet formally recorded its appreciation of Mrs Helen Liddell's contribution as Secretary of State for Scotland, congratulated Mr Alastair Darling on his appointment as Secretary of State for Scotland, and welcomed the reappointment of Mrs Anne McGuire as Parliamentary Under Secretary for the Scotland Office.

The first minister said that he had had a useful meeting with Mr Darling and Lord Falconer on 16 June. Mr Darling had said that the Secretary of State for Scotland and Scotland Office titles remained. His focus, however, would be on Transport, which he regarded as his primary job. He had made it clear that he did not intend to do anything which could be done by the Executive and as a first step, invited the Executive to take over the Friends of Scotland initiative with immediate effect. Mr Darling was considering other activities that might be stopped or transferred to the Executive. including the chair of the euro preparation committee. Mr Darling saw his role not as intervening in issues which could be resolved bilaterally by the Executive with other UK Government Departments but rather as stepping in when asked by the Executive to do so.

He wanted to be helpful and raised the issue of Hepatitis C as an example of 'where he could ensure Scotland's interests were represented at, the UK Cabinet, The Scotland Office would concentrate on helping the Executive at the highest level (particularly with the Prime Minister and Lord Chancellor) and would provide the Executive with information about Whitehall

developments. The First Minister said that it was important that Ministers built upon the helpful tone set by Mr Darling and developed strong bilateral relationships with counterparts in Whitehall.

If difficulties were encountered, then Mr Darling and Mrs McGuire should be briefed to assist.

Even as far back as 2003 The Scottish Government (then still called the Executive, a term dropped while Alex Salmond was First Minister) were keen to promote Scotland as a film production venue. Frank McAveety had attended the Dressed to Kilt event in LA and said he had made good contacts there. It was only this year that Nicola Sturgeon announced [film production facilities will be set up](#) in Leith.

The Cabinet at one of its regular Bute House meetings was exercised by the likely need for reform of family law which 'had significant implications for several Ministerial portfolios'. Marriage accounted for 43% of households and was the 'dominant family form'. However it was recognised that there were 'gaps in legal protection for family formations other than marriage'.

The euro and the UK's imminent entry into that currency was on everyone's minds too.

The First Minister said that the Chancellor was due to make his announcement on entry into the euro on Monday. 9 June. He said that this could present media handling difficulties, given that the respective parties in the coalition might take different positions in the UK Parliament on the issue. A discussion should take place before the end of the week on how the Executive 's response to the announcement might be handled.

In January 2003 a Mr John Elvidge was in attendance at Cabinet as the Head of Finance and Central Services. (A former civil servant, he is now Chair of Edinburgh Airport.)

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The October 2003 meeting of the Local Government Sub-Committee was held against the backdrop of an inquiry into local government finance which was ongoing. Today there are still calls for reform of local government finance.

The Deputy FM introduced a paper seeking the sub-committee's views on how to develop a relationship with COSLA.

LEAKS

There are always leaks in any government and this year was no different with the leak of video footage of Abdel Baset Al-Megrahi's prison accommodation. Cabinet discussed this and what might be said about it at the upcoming sentencing hearing on 24 November.

SLOPPING OUT STOPPED

The Napier case (and the likelihood of the decision 'going against the executive') was discussed by cabinet in relation to the significant financial costs which would be incurred in taking remedial action to address the problem. This was the case of a prisoner who took the government to court over the archaic practice of 'slopping out' in prison cells and led to the introduction of more modern sanitary facilities.

From other papers it appears that Scottish Opera was reportedly on the brink of financial collapse. Planning and the possibility of widening the right of appeal to third parties was being actively discussed. That possibility has only just been discussed this year during the introduction of the Planning Bill.

CONGESTION CHARGE IN EDINBURGH

And the old chestnut of the congestion charge in Edinburgh was discussed at Cabinet level.

Transport Minister Nicol Stephen said in Cabinet that road user charging in Edinburgh, and the fact that only City of Edinburgh residents living outside the outer cordon would be exempt from charges, was likely to become an issue of concern in the media that week. The City of Edinburgh Council planned to launch their consultation on the order to give effect to road charging in the city on 3 October. The cabinet agreed that Mr Stephen should report back to Cabinet on whether there was scope for any Parliamentary involvement in the arrangements relating to the order. In the fullness of time the residents of Edinburgh voted against introducing any such charge.

Welcoming the latest releases, Paul Lowe, Chief Executive of NRS and Keeper of the Records of Scotland, said:

“These records are important for our understanding of our recent history as well as the fabric of our society. Preserving our records and making them available to the wider public is one of the most important aspects of our work here at the National Records of Scotland.

“It’s fascinating to see the range of important issues covered in 2003 ranging from discussions on civil partnerships to child protection and cultural policy in Scotland.”

Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans Graeme Dey said: “The vast resource of information that’s been made available for members of the public to view at the NRS, as well as the wealth of documents which have been published on our website, shows the Scottish Government’s commitment to openness and transparency.

“I am sure that these newly opened files will make for fascinating reading.”



Neil Miller Archivist the National Records Office



Bruno Longmore Head of Government Records