

Tartan Army threat to the Union

TONY BLAIR'S political honeymoon is over. And the New Labour government in London is beginning to fear the possibility that it will preside over the break up of the Union between England and Scotland.

Opinion polls in June put the Scottish Nationalist Party nine points ahead of Labour in the battle for control of the Scottish Parliament. If the SNP take overall control in Edinburgh next May, it will announce a referendum on independence.

But because the electoral system for the Parliament involves proportional representation, no single party is expected to win a majority of the 129 seats. So coalition deals will have to be negotiated, and economic policy may determine who assumes power over Scotland's destiny.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats affirmed in a statement on June 19 that there were policies which might constitute common ground with the SNP.

The SNP are campaigning for land reform, and are exploring the possibility of tax changes to shift the fiscal base on to land. This matches the traditional commitment to land taxation supported by the Liberal Party. It also echoes the declared wishes of three local governments. The councils of Highland, Aberdeenshire and Perth and Kinross have submitted written evidence to the government's Scottish Office declaring support for land value taxation as one of the issues requiring urgent public debate as part of the programme for land reform.

But the Blair government has so far carefully avoided any support for this policy. In fact, the Oscar-winning actress Glenda Jackson, who is Blair's Transport Minister, is on record as

declaring that land value taxation is not on their agenda.

With the Scottish economy suffering more than elsewhere in the UK from the looming recession, people north of the border are likely to vent their anger on the government when they go to the polls in May. And if the Tartan Army is on the march again, it has a number of issues on which to focus territorial disputes.

DISPUTE 1

SCOTTISH LANDOWNERS are claiming that English fishermen are stealing their salmon. Angling rents on some Scottish rivers can reach over £1,000 for a day's fishing on some of the best beats. But the salmon returning to the Tweed river system for the annual spawning season are being intercepted by English men in small boats who cast long nets out at sea to pull in hundreds of salmon during a good season.

Scottish landowners claim: "Here we have a Scottish resource - for they are salmon born in our rivers and heading back to them - but we cannot manage it because it is being exploited by people over the border in England".

But the English fishermen in Northumberland have hit back by claiming: "They want more fish for themselves so that they can charge higher rentals on their rivers".

LAW ON LAND: Sir Kenneth Jupp, MC, who was for 15 years a judge of the English High Court, offers his assessment on proposals to change the law on land tenure in Scotland: see page 12. Sir Kenneth is the author of *Stealing our Land: The Law, Rent & Taxation* (London: Othila Press, 1997).

DISPUTE 2

THE MILITARY defence of Northern England has been transferred to a new headquarters in Edinburgh.

The trade union body representing employees in the Ministry of Defence has written to the Minister of State for the armed forces, warning him: "There could be strong opposition from the North of England about the proposal to locate the northern HQ commanding their troops in a country that could become independent".

● IN THE Autumn issue, *Land & Liberty* will analyse how disputes over fiscal policy will be at the centre of discontent over the political future of the United Kingdom.

An artistic revenge...

HE SYMBOLISES the granite-hard hearts of the landlords who cleared the Scottish highlands: the first Duke of Sutherland. His 100ft stone image looks down from the top of a hill above Golspie on the children of the victims who were dispossessed of their land.

With the aid of the Arts Council, Scotland's artists were invited to contribute original works based on the statue for a touring exhibition. The artists responded with portraits that were far from forgiving. One of them, Peter Howson, portrayed a 20th century job in place of the Duke. "The figure I chose was meant to depict the English aristocracy using English mercenaries. I feel strongly about the Clearances and land reform. I would like to see the monument torn down."

In the foreword to the exhibition's guidebook, the governments' trade minister Brian Wilson writes: "The ownership and use of land are inescapable issues in the Highlands and Islands. They are products of brutal history. They condition the potential for economic development. The land question in the Highlands and Islands is unfinished business. Our sights are firmly set on developing land reform measures that will secure the public good for the 21st century, and that will be a finer memorial than any which could be hewn from stone".