

# Persuasive enough to defy the predictions

SO FAR as I'm aware, none of the reports of Donald Dewar's visit to Scotland Europe last week mentioned whether he had managed to get off the leash for long enough to go poking about the premises.

The Secretary of State, it can be fearlessly revealed, is a great poker about. He once amused himself for several minutes investigating the numerous zipped pockets in a rather complicated bomber jacket belonging to the present writer. So let's picture him, for a moment, contentedly prowling the corridors of the Square de Meeus peering into cupboards, listening discreetly at doors, and trying the light switches.

Leaving the hubbub of the meeting rooms behind, he wanders into the offices on the upper floor. In one corner, he suddenly comes across a haven of relative calm, fenced off by stylish furniture of palest Nordic pine; and seated therein, an amiable man by the name of Håkan Nilsson.

Inquiring politely, the Secretary of State hears that Nilsson is a dedicated fan of what Scotland Europe does, and of how it does it. So much so that he has signed up,

and moved in. There is nothing terribly remarkable about that. The bureau's membership roll has doubled to some 60 organisations in the five years since its launch. What may surprise Dewar more is to learn what Nilsson's job is. He is the official representative in Brussels of Mid-Sweden.

Nor, Nilsson goes on to explain, is he the only Nordic lobbyist who has found Scotland Europe a useful vehicle. Several Finnish regions have joined the mailing list, and there have been joint bids to the Commission for project funding. Dewar, let us do him the credit, departs nodding thoughtfully; for the future of Scotland Europe is a topic about which his home rule White Paper is conspicuously vague.

More than that, it is one of several areas in which there was a distinct shift to ground from the Convention proposals, little noticed in the general admiration that greeted the White Paper on its publication.

As with a dual mandate for members of the parliament (ruled out by the Convention, sanctioned by the White Paper), it is one where Dewar would do well to

## Power play Keith Aitken



revisit the original text as he prepares his legislation.

Both documents were firm that the parliament should be represented in Brussels under its own colours. Quite right. For Scotland's parliament to bang its drum less boldly than those of, say, Catalonia or Baden-Württemberg, against the din of the 130 territorial lobbying operations in town, would plainly be foolish.

WHERE the two papers differed was in what should happen to Scotland Europe. The Convention thought it important that the parliament, in setting up shop, consult and cooperate with Scotland Europe and its affiliates so as to maximise impact and co-ordination. The White Paper confines itself to remarking tetchily that the parliament's office would have "a separate role" from that of

Scotland Europe; the implication being of a new presence, operating discreetly from, or instead of, the present set-up.

Scotland Europe has done well, against the predictions of many commentators, including this one. It was needlessly got up in the incongruous trappings of a commercial analogue, partly out of unionist deference for Whitehall's Brussels outpost, UKRep, and partly because of the last Government's conviction that anything worthwhile must at least look like a private-sector company. Given the EU's ample grounds for exasperation with the Conservatives' doctrinal idiosyncrasies, this seemed unlikely to enhance its authority and influence.

But it has been favoured with successive chief executives, Grant Baird and Charlie Woods, who are more heavyweight and capable

figures than might have been expected given the bureau's prosaic formal mission as a provider of serviced accommodation. Their drive has won it a recognition and respect about town that has largely overcome the fiddly ambivalence of its constitution.

And to be fair, its composition has also proved a strength in some respects. Diversity has lent its distinctiveness, omnivorence and, on the occasions when its members come together in common purpose, a weight of persuasiveness which a mere outpost of government might lack. On the other hand, the stamp of an elected legislature conveys a legitimacy unavailable to a mere medicine show of strolling hustlers.

The best answer, surely, is to combine the two behind the parliament's standard: to bring it under the parliament's leadership, but to retain the facility for other bodies to buy into its resources, share in its prestige and supplement its argument. The pretence that it is some kind of commercial venture is scarcely central to its prowess. But its ability to speak both collectively

and severally should be an asset to the parliament rather than a threat. We are promised a legislature which will embody Scotland's civic diversity. Scotland Europe is not a bad prototype for how that might work.

There may be those who bridle at Scotland's parliament sharing its Saltire with British Telecom or, for that matter, the STUC. But inclusiveness is now a talisman worn by politicians from the Blairites to William Hague's nouveau-cuddly Tories.

A tribune which can represent Scottish opinion from the private to the voluntary sectors, from unions to universities, clearing banks to Cosla, is undoubtedly inclusive.

Besides, it becomes ever clearer that the Scottish parliament is going to have to fight for every iota of involvement in the inter-governmental processes which remain the principal determinant of EU policy. That would seem to suggest that its Brussels arm may spend as much time lobbying Whitehall and its outposts as it does bending the ear of EU institutions.

In which event, it's going to need all the friends it can get.