

Levack at Large
Project Scotland – May 2011

So the Scottish Parliamentary elections are over for another 5 years. Time now for the new SNP majority government to deliver on its manifesto promises.

I have been encouraged by the early statements of intent Alex Salmond (our First Minister in waiting, at time of writing this article) early statements of intent:

His commitment to govern "fairly and wisely".

And his acceptance that, "Although the SNP have the majority of seats, we do not have a monopoly on wisdom.

Mr. Salmond also stated, "The nation can be better". Well I certainly would not disagree with that. In fact in many aspects of Scottish life I am continually frustrated that a country with a population of only 5 million people and with a devolved government, that is now commencing its fourth Parliamentary session, cannot be fleet of foot and change the things that impede economic growth and development in our resource rich country.

One concerning part of the recent election campaign was Alex Salmond's continued assertion that there is an ongoing recovery in Scotland's construction industry. I have continued to take exception and challenge the official statistics produced and indeed wrote to Alex Salmond back in June 2009 raising this very issue. I hope that he does not actually believe his rhetoric.

I noted with interest recently some other industry doubts on Office of National Statistics data. The best of which came from Paul Sheffield, Chief Executive of Kier, who eloquently stated that, "the ONS figures for last year were baloney".

Manifestos are interesting documents. Firstly, apart from journalists and a few political anoraks, I suspect nobody actually reads them. They promise everything on the basis that in reality delivery is never questioned. They are aspirational and populist. The bottom line is that they are not unlike an individual's CV when applying for that dream job. Some basis of truth in terms of the positives, partly exaggerated, and the bad or difficult parts "airbrushed" to improve the presentation.

When the SNP Government first came to power in 2007, I believe they were caught like a rabbit in the headlights. This was particularly true in respect of their manifesto commitment to establish the Scottish Futures Trust (SFT). There was no detail and indeed when they came to power the initial consultation was brief, to say the least. Time has now moved on and SFT has at long last started to gather some momentum. However, it still has a long way to go to deliver the "bricks and mortar" that will convince the Scottish construction sector of its potential and prove to the citizens of Scotland that it can deliver value for money.

The SNP manifesto document, and I have read it, makes several pledges that should give the Scottish construction sector some hope. Indeed the statement on the front cover boldly states – “Now is a time for Scotland to keep moving forward”. At the moment, any forward movement witnessed in the construction sector is at best walking pace.

We all understand that capital budgets will be cut by a third over the next three years. What must be tackled is the procurement process. On the basis that Alex Salmond has said, “we don’t have a monopoly of wisdom”, I would hope that he and his Ministerial colleagues will be listening to the Scottish Building Federation and other construction organisations in the months to come. His party manifesto makes pledges in respect of house building, schools, energy efficiency, heritage and the built environment and skills. Delivering on these promises and commitments can assist the Scottish construction industry to weather the rest of this storm and make a significant contribution to recovery and sustainable economic growth when macro economic conditions allow.

So well done ‘Eck and more power to your elbow but please listen and accept advice from those that know their onions.