

The new landscape of Scottish politics: Wolves in the Drawing Room

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Neal Ascherson examines the new landscape of Scottish politics.

At first I thought: nothing's changed here, nothing's going to change. I spent part of my childhood in Greenock, and came back in 1999 to stand in next-door Port Glasgow as a candidate in the first Scottish Parliament elections. In my first spell there, the great estuary of the Clyde was lined for mile after mile with clanging, sparking shipyards, and every shop-sign in West Blackhall Street read 'SCWS' – Scottish Co-Operative Wholesale Society. When I returned nearly 50 years later, the yards had vanished. There were a few charity shops, an Asda; in grey housing schemes up the hillside, a shrunken population waited quietly for the council to repair broken doors and fences. The young, it was said, traded heroin if they needed cash for clothes and clubbing. The young with the energy to get out of their beds, that is.

In May 2011, two days before the election, I could find not one poster in a window, not one canvasser on a sunny street. And yet each lamppost was decorated with little flags for each of the four contesting parties – as if the council had been told to mark the occasion. Labour's 'campaign headquarters' in the Port and in Greenock were empty behind locked doors, with not even a sticker to identify them. Up the hill in Boglestone, the Orange Lodge looked just as it used to when I was a candidate: a low concrete bunker with bombproof grids over its windows. Nobody about.

But this isn't a ghost town. Greenock is struggling into recovery now. It is a place built for outward vision and hope, a big theatre in which tier on tier of streets look out across the estuary to the mountains. Not only James Watt, but many painters, novelists and poets began here. After utter collapse, small citizens' groups are trying to rub the old town back to life, to restore hope: a new theatre, the restoration of the huge ropeworks factory, a protest (why use cobbles imported from China, in a landscape of good Scottish stone?).

The rhetoric of hope ('be part of better') is what brought Alex Salmond and the SNP their immense victory. Greenock and Inverclyde was one of the very few Scottish working-class constituencies to stay with Labour, but only just: the SNP vote boiled up to come less than 2 per cent behind. At Airdrie and Shotts, in post-industrial Lanarkshire, Alex Neil of the SNP spectacularly broke through to seize the constituency from Labour by a majority of 2000. Airdrie was once coal and shale-oil mining, Shotts was coal and a great ironworks. I have known Alex as a friend for many years; son and grandson of South Ayrshire miners, there is little he doesn't know about Scottish working-class culture and the desolation of workless towns. But the sudden disintegration of Labour's century-long dominion over industrial Scotland was about more than personalities.

On the way to Alex's campaign rooms, I walked past Airdrie's massive Orange Lodge, flying a dozen Union flags. Had he had trouble with the lodge, as a candidate committed to ending the Union? 'Not at all,' Alex said. He had been well received, and many of the members told him they were going to vote SNP, even though they were opposed to independence. That, really, is the key to what happened on 5 May. A rusty gate swung open, as tens of thousands of Scots realised that they could vote for Salmond's party without buying its project of independence. I heard over and over again that the four-year SNP minority government had been 'Quite good!' More cautiously, people felt that the SNP had proved itself to be 'Scotland's party', and could identify several of the government team.

The old image of the SNP as 'wild amateurs' or 'a one-man band' no longer held true. It used to be Labour that could campaign on its record in office. But now, for the first time, it was Labour - stripped of leadership talent by internal vendettas and the lure of Westminster - that seemed unfamiliar, untried. The ancient weapon thought so lethal even a month ago - 'We are the party that protects Scottish working people from Tory governments' - was flourished but didn't strike home.

So who turned the key to that gate? Labour's campaign was certainly hopeless. The reason the old battleaxe failed was that Scottish electors are now well accustomed to voting one way for Holyrood and another for Westminster. Ed Miliband and Ed Balls dashed up from London and treated them like idiots: the point of this election, they said, was to 'send a message to Westminster' and the coalition. That was a fatal discord. The Scots felt they were sending a message to Edinburgh, not London, and they were annoyed. The feeling that the new Labour leaders 'just don't get it' deepened. But the true key-turner was Big Eck, cunning Salmond himself. He is not reneging on the SNP's independence commitment, or cloaking it in vagueness. Instead, he has repackaged it and put it in a basket with other shiny ambitions: Scotland as world leader in renewables, a new tax system, wider borrowing powers, 'a fairer Scotland' and so forth. Independence with its referendum no longer protrudes. It begins to make sense to want an SNP government, but also to want to stay in the United Kingdom 'for the moment, see how it goes, maybe I'll feel different one day ...'

This sort of self-persuasion also released a horde of disgusted Scottish Lib Dems into the SNP park. Talking to some of them in Edinburgh and Glasgow, I saw that this was often their second migration. Once they had been refugees from Blairism and New Labour. Now they were in renewed flight from Cleggery. For such cultured, douce folk, the language they used about the coalition was shocking. Hatred of English Tories isn't universal in Scotland. But it's the one jagged ingredient which never softens, never dissolves in the political broth.

Characteristically, Salmond has gone charging in while his adversaries are still in shock. 'Geeze corporation tax, borrowing rights, control of the Crown Estate in Scotland!' But the great SNP triumph is fragile. It's not just the riddle of how his government will pay for its promises, as the block grant is cut back by a Westminster coalition now desperate to humble Big Eck. It's politically fragile too. Precisely because Scottish voters are sophisticated, many of those conquered seats may well go back to Labour in the next Westminster election. If they don't, and a great bloc of Nationalist MPs pours into the Commons in 2015, the Union's fate would be pretty much sealed. We would enter the scenario predicted - with some relish - by Tom Nairn, the sage of Scottish political prophecy: 'Any day now the wolves will break into the drawing room - and it'll not be the cucumber sandwiches they're after!'

But that seems unlikely. Assuming the wolves are still some way off, might not a routine emerge whereby voters choose the SNP to govern Scotland but Labour to govern Britain or to fight Tory-led policies in London? More worrying for Salmond, will that routine include voting yes to the SNP at Holyrood but no to independence when the referendum finally comes? That would be the outcome if independence were put to the Scottish people tomorrow, and all those happy new Nationalist MSPs

know it.

Look at Quebec. In 1976, the nationalist Parti Québécois swept to power. But when the PQ held its 'sovereignty-association' referendum in 1980, it lost badly, by about 60 per cent No to 40 per cent Yes. The PQ won another election in 1994 on a surge of 'separatist' passion. But, again, the independence referendum of 1995 failed, this time by a whisker – 1.16 per cent. For the next few years, the rough pattern was that Quebec would vote secessionist for the provincial government, but often for other parties at Canadian federal elections. There were no more referendums, and the nationalist cause gradually lost touch with new generations. Nemesis arrived this year, in the federal elections held three days before the ones for Holyrood. In Quebec the New Democratic Party (NDP), old-fashioned socialists, slaughtered the Bloc Québécois (the PQ's alias for federal elections to Ottawa), which lost 43 of its 47 seats. This isn't the end of the story: Quebec separatism comes in sudden upwellings and will certainly reassert itself. But it's a warning of how damaging that cycle of yes to a secessionist party and no to its cause can be.

Canada this month sent another political message, not just to Scotland but to Ancient Britain as a whole. The UK referendum campaigns had only three days to digest the grotesque outcomes of the Canadian poll. Neither, as far as I can see, even noticed them. But Canada is the supreme example of how first past the post can explode into madness when it has to cope with more than two contending parties. In Quebec, the Bloc Québécois got nearly 24 per cent of the votes but only 5.3 per cent of the seats. In Saskatchewan, the NDP won almost a third of the vote – and no seats at all. That's the insult to democracy the British swallowed on 5 May. I confess to voting no to AV that day, on the Leninist principle of the worse, the better. Soon enough, Nemesis will move to Westminster, in the form of a result so insufferably daft and unfair that another, better choice will have to be offered to the Ukanians.

Before the Scottish poll, the shrewdest of the Glasgow and Edinburgh commentariat said: 'Down south, they think this election is all about whether to leave the UK. How naive! The independence thing is on the back burner now, even inside the SNP. This is about choosing who governs Scotland best.' But perhaps the pundits are wrong in the long term. It's true that the wish for independence is at present a minority wish – quite widespread, but of low intensity. But are the good governing of Scotland and the winning of independence really either/or, really mutually exclusive? Or could it be that in the mind of Salmond, emperor of the long game, the first leads gently but inexorably to the second?

The 40-page SNP manifesto is a gaudy encyclopedia of visions, promises and relentless optimism. 'Scotland is on a journey and the path ahead is a bright one.' But Salmond's plans for Scotland's recovery and progress – full taxation powers for Holyrood, control of immigration, rights to at least some oil and gas revenue, a Scottish voice in the European Union – could be brought up short by the limits of devolution and of the Union itself. And then – making the large assumption that Salmond's grand programme was already showing results – independence could come to seem practical, necessary, even a way of keeping Scotland on a course already chosen. Getting the Scots to that point of view within five years appears improbable. But so did the scale of the election victory.

What happened on 5 May – and that includes the English local elections and the referendum – was bad news for Britishness. More precisely, it showed how weak political Britishness has become. The old gap in attitudes between the North of England and the wealthy, pampered South-East is widening. As for the future of the Anglo-Scottish Union, the difficulty is to find anyone who cares strongly about it, especially south of the border. Once, the Union seemed a mighty pillar supporting British liberty and strength. Now English people who notice it wonder what it was for. David Cameron says he will fight to prevent the break-up of Britain 'with every single fibre'. But why? When Salmond rang him up after the election and read out a shopping list of demands, Cameron

seems to have been oddly silent. Many London commentators made a point I raised in this journal some years ago (5 April 2007): that Cameron could ensure a permanent Tory majority in the Commons by provoking the Scots into leaving the Union, just as Václav Klaus ensured himself a solid majority by leveraging the Slovaks out of Czechoslovakia in 1992. But there is no sign yet that Cameron has that ruthless political drive. Heir to the imperial tradition of his caste, Cameron has scruples. His duty is to hold the tribes together under the queen.

In fact, there is probably more unionist passion in Scotland than in England. Much of it is located in the Scottish Labour Party, which for generations has seen high office at Westminster as the destination of the success trail. Would Labour's disaster of 5 May have happened if any of its best and brightest – Robin Cook, Douglas Alexander, Alistair Darling, Gordon Brown, even John Smith – had stayed in Scotland to lead the party and the devolved government at Holyrood? Only Donald Dewar took the train back north and became first minister of Scotland in 1999. It would be good to think that John Smith, who fought so hard to bring Labour-designed devolution about, might have boarded the same train had he not died so early. As it is, the Scottish Labour MPs are dependent on the Union for their chosen careers. So, less blatantly, are Ed Miliband and the rest of his party, whose chances of returning to power hang on Scottish Labour seats in a British Parliament.

Labour at Holyrood, in the two coalition governments with the Liberal Democrats, did breed some attractive and vigorous figures. But few of them remain today. A starry group of young women ministers – Wendy Alexander and Susan Deacon among them – were driven out of politics by opaque vendettas and sheer disillusion. The cruel truth is that Scottish Labour was less interested in exploring devolution to transform Scotland than in using it to keep the Nationalists out of power (to be fair, this was the motive that originally drove the Wilson and Callaghan governments to design devolution back in the 1970s). It backfired in 2007, when the SNP won enough seats to form a minority government. Now the backfire has become a deafening blast of rejection.

Those who planned the Scottish Parliament did so in the hope that it would be a model of cross-party consensus. In practice, Labour has displayed unforgiving hatred towards the SNP and its initiatives, a hatred some in the SNP have learned to return. This loathing only grew stronger as Labour's power monopoly in west-central Scotland and the Glasgow conurbation crumbled. Some of that crumbling followed the introduction of PR in local government elections, which dissolved many local party oligarchies. Some, though, was to do with minds changing in the wider Labour movement. In Lanarkshire, I kept coming across trade-union veterans, men and women who had spent their lives fighting for working people in this landscape of dead mines and half-forgotten ironworks, who no longer regarded the SNP as 'Tartan Tories'. Sickened by Blairite neoliberalism and memories of the Iraq War, they hoped that the SNP might offer more of their Old Labour values.

What would an SNP Scotland look like, 'maximally devolved' within the UK or independent? The strange and sad thing is that it would look very much like a Scottish Labour Scotland – if that party were decisively to loosen its ties with London and follow its heart. Both are made up of leftish social-democrats, who believe in a strong public sector and state regulation to protect capitalism from its own excesses. Both are emotionally anti-nuclear and friendly to renewables. The SNP must now square the circle of demanding that military bases in Scotland stay open (employment!) while insisting that Trident and the nuclear base at Faslane be removed (international justice and peace). Left to itself, Scottish Labour would almost certainly take the same line.

If Salmond hadn't won an absolute majority, the logic would have pointed straight to a 'grand coalition' of SNP and Labour. Apart from independence, they want much the same things. After all, one way to describe what's going on in Scotland is that a fortress is being thrown up to keep out the worst of the privatising, state-slashing, neoliberal tide: a northern redoubt to preserve and modernise what's left of British social democracy and the postwar consensus. But coalition would

have been unthinkable. Too long spent in tribal hatred. And real differences. Labour in Scotland has a hundred-year history of sacrifice, comradeship and struggle. The SNP has never been socialist, and came late to social democracy. The paint on its social credentials is still drying. Salmond was a banker, but his minority government sat helplessly as Scotland's banks and its main building society went the way of Iceland and Ireland. (It's an unwelcome truth that Scotland escaped the same devastation only because it was inside the United Kingdom, and Gordon Brown rescued its finances.)

The fundamental perception of British socialism, and Scottish socialism especially, is about wasted lives, the strangled destinies of ordinary people. Last summer, I went to Jimmy Reid's funeral in Govan. Billy Connolly, once an apprentice in the same shipyard, told a story about going for walks with Reid in Glasgow. 'He'd point to a tower block and say: "Behind that window is a guy who could win Formula One. And behind that one there's a winner of the round-the-world yacht race. And behind the next one ... And none of them will ever get the chance to sit at the wheel of a racing car or in the cockpit of a yacht."' Does the SNP see its fellow human beings that way? It certainly sees the nation clearly: it has all the angry confidence, the impatience to get down to the heavy lifting, the bright-morning optimism Labour has lost. But how about the compassion?

Jimmy Reid began in the Communist Party, moved to Labour but ended up in the SNP. Latterly, whichever party he was in, he was fond of saying that 'the rat race is for rats.' Alex Salmond might prefer Scotland to win the race first and waste the rats afterwards. But at the funeral he announced that Reid's words, and the speech that contained them, would be reprinted and distributed to every schoolchild in Scotland. After he said this, Salmond looked up from his text and added, almost to himself: 'What's the point of being first minister if you can't do things?' And Govan Old Church slowly began to rumble with applause, hands beaten by shipyard workers, bankers, ministers of the kirk, women and men of all the parties including Tories, soldiers on leave, families in black who had come from the isles. On this they agreed: in Jimmy Reid's name, they wanted this man to do things. Now he can.

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P.S.

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http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n11/neal-ascherson/wolves-in-the-drawing-room?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=3311&hq_e=el&hq_m=881494&hq_l=15&hq_v=31abeef303

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