

Letter from Scotland



Raising the flag above the
parapet

“Don’t panic!” But of course they did. The Dad’s Army from the south came north with just a week to go before the referendum to urge us Jocks to stay with the Union and fly the British flag. In what they imagined was a show of solidarity, they even flew the blue Saltire over 10 Downing Street (though it fell down the first time they tried).

David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg suddenly woke up to the possibility that Scotland could be politely withdrawing from Britain on Thursday. An opinion poll in the papers at the weekend put the Yes camp ahead for the first time since the campaign began nearly two years ago. The 20 per cent lead the three men in suits thought they had safely in the bag, disappeared over the summer. Other opinion polls were also pointing to a result too close to call.

Virtually in tears, David Cameron told a captive audience of finance workers at Scottish Widows in Edinburgh that he could understand people in Scotland wanting to vote against the “effing Tories” but this referendum was about more than that. “I put my country before my party,” he declared. “And I want Scotland to stay in the Union.”

He’d abandoned the Punch and Judy Show of Prime Minister’s Question Time at Westminster to attend to this serious business in Scotland. So too did 100 Labour MPs who travelled up with Ed Miliband to plead with Labour voters to stick with the Union and help build a fairer society for the whole of Britain. Nick Clegg went to the Borders to urge Scots not to rebuild the border between Scotland and England.

Meanwhile, a smiling Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon were street-walking in Edinburgh, meeting the people and accusing "Team Westminster" of being in a blind panic.

The money markets had panicked on hearing the news from the opinion polls. The pound slumped on the international money markets. Prominent British companies lost around 2 per cent of their share value. Even the London media began to take notice, dispatching their anchormen to Edinburgh to see what all the fuss was about.

The sleeping giant of Fife, Gordon Brown, came growling across the Forth Bridge to make his Midlothian campaign speech, echoing Gladstone's Midlothian campaign in the 1880s. He spelt out a time-table for more powers for the Scottish Parliament if there's a No vote on Thursday. Within 30 days, he said, all unionist parties will meet to draw up a detailed plan for the devolution of more income tax and welfare benefits to the Scottish Parliament. By St Andrew's Day, 30th November, there will be a White Paper, by Burns Night 25th January there will be draft legislation to be voted into law immediately after the general election in May next year.

But has it all come too late ? Certainly it was after many people had already voted (by post). Was it a sign of that aforementioned panic ? Why couldn't all this have been done months ago ? Could the promises be trusted....after what happened in 1979 ? And were the promises sincere, given that they come at the end of a long and negative campaign, dubbed Project Fear.

In my view, the unionist parties have only themselves to blame if they fail to win the vote on Thursday. They have been negative from the start. First they claimed the referendum was "illegal". Then there couldn't be a second question (the one which the unionist parties are now trying to substitute for the No question ie more powers for the Holyrood Parliament). Then 16 and 17 year-olds couldn't vote. Then an

independent Scotland couldn't use the pound. Then it wouldn't have enough oil revenues. Then it couldn't get into the EU or NATO. All of which have turned out to be counter-productive because Scots have simply replied: "Yes we can !"

I went to the Grassmarket in Edinburgh on Monday afternoon to hear the Labour MP Jim Murphy at his 91st town meeting and he was at it again, telling his Labour audience that the SNP were deceiving the people of Scotland over the NHS. He produced a senior doctor to back up his claim – though he was the first doctor I've seen for years who was wearing a white coat and a stethoscope. While the good doctor was speaking, Mr Murphy spent most of his time drinking Irn Bru and chatting to Lord Robertson (the man who famously said devolution would kill the SNP stone dead). Chaps, this is no way to run a campaign.

The opinion polls are now swinging like a weathercock on a squally day. Voices are getting more strident. The banks and supermarkets are entering the fray, hinting that they will have to move their registered headquarters or put up prices in the event of a Yes vote. Alex Salmond says none of this will deter Scots from voting for independence. "We are on the cusp of making history," he said.

On Thursday the BBC brought together the biggest group of young voters ever assembled in a television debate. Over 7,500 16 and 17 year-olds packed into Hydro in Glasgow to ask their questions of the Yes and No politicians, mic-ed up like pop stars – Nicola Sturgeon, Ruth Davidson, Patrick Harvie and George Galloway. It was so refreshing to see young people asking the questions and forming their opinions. It doesn't happen often in Scotland, geared as we usually are to the concerns of the middle-aged and the elderly.

On Thursday too, my scout troop here in Edinburgh staged our own referendum debate, with speakers from the official Yes and No camps. Even among these 11-14 year-olds, the hands were flying up to ask questions – about the pound, about jobs,

about university research, about the Queen, about Trident.

If nothing else, this referendum has got us all talking as well as flag waving.