

Letter from Scotland



Referendum fallout

On a dull, misty, September day, Scotland reluctantly decided to stay with the rest of Britain, for better or for worse, and we lost our First Minister as a result. We are not used to such dramatic events. We usually live a quiet life, eking out a modest living on the north west fringe of Europe.

But in a single volcanic day we were subjected to a series of political shocks. First we astounded ourselves with a turnout of 85 per cent to answer a startlingly fundamental question: "Should Scotland be an independent country?" As the results started to come in, Glasgow's answer was Yes, so was Dundee's, and we thought the opinion polls were wrong and that Alex Salmond and the SNP might win.

Then as the night wore on, it became clear that the rest of Scotland had voted No, and by even more than the opinion polls were predicting, 55 per cent to 45 per cent. At 6am, Alex Salmond, graciously I thought, accepted the decision of the people and called on the Westminster politicians to fulfil their vows to deliver more powers to the Scottish parliament.

Within an hour the Prime Minister was on his doorstep in Downing Street promising to do just that, and more. England, Wales and Northern Ireland were also to have greater devolved powers, and on the same time-table as Scotland.

And herein lies the rub, because such a complex federalisation of the British state can hardly be delivered in a few months. Especially at Westminster, which, when viewed from Scotland, seems to be a witches cauldron of party bickering, bonuses, expenses, austerity, welfare cuts, privatisation and euro-

scepticism.

Then, at 4pm, came the final shock of this extraordinary day. Alex Salmond announced he was quitting as leader of the SNP and therefore as First Minister. He had taken the independence movement as far as it would go, for the moment, and it was time for a new leader "to hold Westminster's feet to the fire" and deliver more powers to the Scottish Parliament.

The master tactician had decided that it was best for him to leave while his departure was still a surprise. He is taking responsibility for the SNP's defeat but, in a way, the referendum campaign has also been his triumph. It has set the political heather on fire, re-invented the public meeting and the discussion of political matters in homes, colleges, workplaces, gyms, pubs, trains and maybe even planes. Never have so many Saltires been flown. It has lifted the turnout at elections from the usual 60 per cent to 85 per cent and swelled support for independence from 30 per cent to 45 per cent. For the last week it has even engaged the London media and the Westminster political class. And today, it has shaken the constitutional bedrock of Britain.

Not bad for one balding, middle aged man from Linlithgow. Alex Salmond has been leader of the SNP for 10 years – following an earlier 10 year stint. He has brought the party from a poor third, to the winner of two elections and to the referendum that, arguably, has changed Scotland and Britain for ever, despite resulting in a clear No.

The new leader of the SNP will undoubtedly be the feisty Nicola Sturgeon who eats unionist politicians for breakfast and has brought women and the city of Glasgow into the political conversation. She will now be pitched against David Cameron and Ed Miliband in the fight for Scottish home rule.

It will probably be a messy affair. Ordinary people will turn back to their own lives and leave politics to the politicians.

The world's media will decamp to other crises and Scotland will slip back into being a quiet backwater on the western fringe of Europe.

But we have lived through interesting times and been through a searing 24 hours.