

Letter from Scotland



If a peaceful transition of power from one leader to another is the sign of a mature democracy, then Scotland has grown up. This weekend the grand master Alex Salmond hands over to his able assistant Nicola Sturgeon. She's been his understudy for the last seven years as the SNP has come to dominate Scottish politics. But what is Nicola Sturgeon like ? And will she take the SNP and Scotland in a different direction ?

The cartoonists have given us a picture of Alex Salmond as a large and cuddly panda, usually getting the better of his opponents. Nicola Sturgeon they've portrayed as a "nippy sweetie", one of those clever wee women from Glasgow with an annoyingly lot to say. She is indeed from the West, from Ayrshire, and she is undoubtedly clever. But what she has to say is delivered cheerfully, with precision and force but often with an ironic chuckle at the foolishness of the opposition.



Folk south of the border must see her as a Boadicea or Joan of Arc, determined to fight any foe and lead her people to freedom, if not next year, then in five or ten years time. She has refused to rule out another referendum on independence...when the time is right. Scots are more inclined to see her as "a lass o' pairts" – self-made, from a humble background, lawyer and political activist from the start. She joined the SNP when she was 16 and after several tries, was eventually elected as an MSP for Glasgow Region and then Glasgow Govan.

Her sheer ability and application saw her rise quickly inside the party. She even put her name forward for the leadership before teaming up with Alex Salmond for his "second coming."

She is married to the party's general secretary, Peter Murrell, a modest behind-the-scenes man who is strong on organisation and strategy.



A young-looking 44, Nicola Sturgeon allows the SNP to renew its image for the next generation. She successfully appealed to women and the young during the referendum campaign – bringing enough of them on board to come within touching distance of independence. Her own political philosophy was formed by opposition to Mrs Thatcher and it's clear that greater “social justice” or equality will be a major part of her agenda.

Alex Salmond, at his final outing at first minister's question time on Thursday, was asked what he thought were his greatest achievements in government. His choice was interesting – “free education” by which he meant no student fees, and free school meals for children in the first three years of primary school. I thought he might have mentioned standing up to the UK government's austerity measures or the move towards renewable energy or creating more apprenticeships, or the lowest crime figures for 40 years. But no, he chose “social justice” measurers.

It will be interesting to see if the SNP can hold on to this traditionally Labour agenda as the Labour Party tries to rebuild itself in Scotland under its soon-to-be-elected new leader.

It will be interesting to see, too, if the SNP can stay as united under Nicola Sturgeon as it did under Alex Salmond. Will she be able to find new talent and bring them into her team ? And will she connect with ordinary people, as Alex Salmond was able to do with his folksy, Burns-quoting style.

Nicola Sturgeon will be beatified this weekend at the SNP conference in Perth. She will be elected first minister at

Holyrood on Tuesday, thanks to the SNP's overall majority.

She takes the helm when the tide is running in the SNP's favour. It's riding high in the polls, party membership is at record levels (84,000, dwarfing every other party in Scotland). The economy is showing signs of recovery at last – figures out this week show unemployment down to 5.9 per cent and real wages increasing for the first time since the great crash.

But there are still more “austerity” cuts to come. Will Nicola Sturgeon be able to blame Westminster in the same way as Alex Salmond was able to do ? And will the home-rule negotiations over the winter produce a settlement which benefits the SNP or will it take the wind out of its sails ?

Just as Joan of Arc famously prayed for wind to take the French fleet down river to face the English invaders at Orleans, the newly sainted Nicola will be praying for a fair wind as the SNP sets out on its new journey.

