

Salmond's final speech – “Better days ahead”

This is the full text of the final speech which The Rt Hon Alex Salmond has made as First Minister of Scotland before stepping down in favour of his deputy and ‘apprentice’, Nicola Sturgeon, after seven and a half years in the position which he described as ‘the privilege of my life’.



Tomorrow afternoon the sole nomination of Nicola Sturgeon as First Minister will be made and seconded by Members of the Scottish Parliament.

The candidate is allowed to speak in support of her candidature, and voting will then take place at 14.40.

The Presiding Officer, Tricia Marwick will recommend the appointment of the new First Minister to Her Majesty The Queen which should formalise the process.

There has been so much talk of the departing First Minister that it is easy to forget that Ms Sturgeon will be our country's first female First Minister,

Presiding Officer,

Firstly I have to – not for the first time – disappoint Willie Rennie.

I took it from his question at First Ministers questions last Thursday that he was making a very subtle, last-ditch attempt to persuade me to stay in post.

I have given his suggestion great thought – but have decided to resign anyway as at the start of the parliamentary business tomorrow. This notice should allow Mr Rennie ample time to secure his nominations to have a tilt at the job. I assure him that if he so decided then I will weigh up his candidacy with great care – before casting my vote for my friend and colleague Nicola Sturgeon.

Presiding Officer, there are now only a minority of members here today who -like you and I -attended the opening ceremony of this reconvened Parliament in 1999. It was a great day – we heard moving poetry; the late Donald Dewar gave the finest speech of his life and when Sheenah Wellington sang “A man’s a man for a’ that”, the entire chamber joined in for the final verse.

However one other thing which struck me about that day was that when the MSPs entered the General Assembly Hall on the Mound, we were cheered in by the public. I’d never seen that level of public engagement in politics before – and until this past summer, I’ve never seen it since!

The public enthusiasm on that first day was an inspiration, but also a challenge. Eddie Morgan captured the mood perfectly 5 years later, in his poem to mark the opening of this Parliament building:

... We give you our consent to govern, don’t pocket it and ride away.

*We give you our deepest dearest wish to govern well,
don’t say we have no mandate to be so bold.*

My view is that on the whole, this parliament has fulfilled the public’s wishes, and earned their consent; we’ve accepted the mandate to be bold. Our composition reflects much of the diversity of modern Scotland. We have become the chief hub of national discourse and debate; the fulcrum of Scottish public life; the chamber which people expect to reflect their

priorities, values and hopes.

That's not because of any one political party, it's because of the commitment of so many of the members over the last 15 years. I think in particular of some of the MSPs who are no longer with us – Donald Dewar, Margaret Ewing, Bashir Ahmed, Phil Gallie, Donald Gorrie, David McLetchie, Brian Adam, Helen Eadie, John Farquhar Munro, Sam Galbraith and, of course, the truly remarkable Margo Macdonald

This Parliament's procedures are not perfect – how could they be, we are not actually 15 years old, we are 15 years young – and you, Presiding Officer, have implemented significant improvements. But this Parliament has great strengths and we should never underplay them.

The last speech I made in this chamber was at the Business in Parliament Conference, where 100 business representatives were sitting in the chamber here alongside six Ministers, 17 MSPs and people from the third sector and from the wider public sector. Last year, more than 400 different organisations held events in this building. Overall, in 15 years we've welcomed more than 4 million visitors.

That degree of accessibility is not unique in the democratic world but it is very rare and pretty impressive. Throughout my time as First Minister I have tried to reflect that approach of the Government to our key social partners. Last week the STUC made exactly that point at our regular meetings between Government and General Council.

I have led a minority administration and a majority one. Minority government requires negotiation – to recognise honest disagreement, and then compromise in the public interest.

And Presiding Officer, I have no idea if that experience of minority government in this place will ever again come in handy in another place.

Interestingly when we had a minority government, the SNP was on the side of the majority for 80% of the votes in this chamber. There were hardly any occasions when all of the other parties lined up against us. Mind you there was that small matter of the Edinburgh trams!

But perhaps the better, more important point to reflect on today is that on many occasions, in both minority government and majority government, there has been cross party support for social and economic change.

For example I think on February 2008, when the Liberal Democrats and Greens voted with us to restore the principle of free higher education in Scotland.

Or June 2009, when we passed the most ambitious climate change legislation of any country in the world – we had the support of every party in this chamber, including the conservative party.

Or March of this year when Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens joined with us to ensure that nobody need face eviction from their home as a consequence of the bedroom tax.

But most of all, I think about the consistent and often joint endeavour, against the headwinds of economic circumstance and austerity – to make Scotland a stronger, fairer, more cohesive nation.

Throughout my time as First Minister I have heard it said by some in this place that the Government's pursuit of national independence crowded out other issues, even that the constitution was of little interest to Scotland.

But that has not been the experience or the verdict of the people.

We have all just lived through the most invigorating, extraordinary debates of the democratic era – one of the most

impressive of any country anywhere at any time.

It is argued that people everywhere have become disengaged from politics.

Not in Scotland in 2014.

It is said that they no longer care about the business of governance.

Not in Scotland in 2014.

In the last few months we have watched an electorate passionately engaged in the exhilarating business of fashioning their future.

I see little evidence that the people of Scotland resented the government pursuing that business with them and for them.

It was considerate of the Daily Record newspaper – a consistent bulwark for this government over the last seven years – to provide a poll showing 50 per cent SNP support on the day I am leaving! Mind you, it might be because I'm leaving!

It is a wise newspaper which listens to the verdict of its readers!

The more important realisation is this: we are on a political journey and each step along the way has been dictated by the impact of the constitution on the issues which mean most to ordinary Scots.

This Parliament was reborn out of the realisation that we could no longer afford to have our domestic politics dictated by governments without democratic legitimacy.

We progressed because people became impatient with politicians who wanted to administer rather than to govern.

And we will grow further yet because people wish to shape the

circumstances around them and are demanding a Parliament fully equipped for that task.

The last twelve months have been an extraordinary example of this nation's talents and capabilities. It's been a year of substantial economic progress – 50,000 more people in employment, we have a record total of women in employment in Scotland, and figures showing inward investment at a 17-year high.

We've hosted our year of Homecoming, staged the Ryder Cup, and organised the greatest ever Commonwealth Games. And we've managed a referendum which has been hailed around the world as a model of truly participative democracy.

Scotland has a new sense of political confidence and a new sense of economic confidence. They are reinforcing each other and – wherever we are travelling together as a nation – are transforming this country for the better.

Presiding Officer, that new sense of political confidence, of engagement, is the point I wish to end. At the start of my speech I mentioned the enthusiasm generated by the re-establishment of this parliament in 1999, when the MSPs were applauded into the Assembly Hall on the mound. Fifteen years on, the applause has evolved into something much more meaningful – sustained, critical, constructive engagement involving people in every part of the country.

Scotland now has the most energised, empowered and informed electorate of any country in Europe.

We have a new generation of citizens who understand that their opinion matters, who believe that their voice will be heard, and who know that their vote can shape the society they live in.

For all of us, that should be a point of pride: a source of challenge. For me, the sense of generational change has been

a factor in deciding the time is right to move on from being First Minister. For this parliament, it should spur us to become even more accessible, to serve the new expectations of the people.

For everyone in public life, it should inspire us to involve, include and empower the electorate, as we continue the quest to create a more prosperous, more equal Scotland. I wish each and every one of you well in pursuit of that endeavour.

Presiding officer, it has been the privilege of my life to serve as First Minister for these last seven and a half years. Any parting is tinged with some sorrow, but in this case, it is vastly outweighed by a sense of optimism and confidence. Confidence that we will have an outstanding new First Minister, confidence in the standing and capability of this chamber and – most of all – confidence in the wisdom, talent and potential of the people of Scotland.

Scotland has changed – changed utterly, and much for the better – over the 15 years of this Parliament and over the seven years of this government.

But I'm happy to say, with every degree of certainty, that more change and better days lie ahead for this Parliament and for Scotland.

Earlier in the day in his last formal act as First Minister, except to tender his resignation tomorrow, Salmond unveiled a monument to higher education at Heriot Watt University. The monument is in the form of a stone carved by apprentices from the Natural Conservation Centre in Elgin.

The rock is inscribed with the words of the statement made by the First Minister made in March 2011 which reads:

“The rocks will melt with the sun before I allow tuition fees

to be imposed on Scottish students."

The First Minister claimed that The Scottish Government's single biggest achievement was the abolition of tuition fees which ensures that those who wish to have a higher education can do so based on their ability ,not ability to pay, a theme which resounds from the latest book written by Nobel prize winning economist, Joseph Stiglitz.

Stiglitz was Salmond's economic adviser and he has forecast a new Enlightenment rising from Scots educated for free at Scottish universities.