

Letter from Scotland



Things have changed, changed utterly. The SNP wave that began during the referendum campaign last year has now overwhelmed all the “old politics” and washed away the Labour Party, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. Who would have thought just a short year ago that these old political champions would each be reduced to just one seat in Scotland?

“The Scottish lion has roared.” That’s how Alex Salmond put it as he made his victory speech in Gordon. Why he chose a lion rather than a stag I can’t quite understand but I see his point. The people of Scotland have had enough of “Westminster austerity”....the public sector cuts, the harsh new welfare regime, the scandal of high pay, bonuses and expenses fiddles for the fat-cats in London. They have endured seven years of famine, caused by those fat-cats, and now, they reckon, it is time to change all that.



The huge swing to the SNP (from 6 seats to 56) is, of course, a leap of faith. Nicola Sturgeon and Alex Salmond offered voters the hope, rather than the reality, that things could get better. With the Conservatives back in power at Westminster the reality is that the cuts will get deeper (£30bn of them this year), the welfare changes harsher (a £12bn cut is planned) and taxes on the rich will be reduced (eg inheritance tax).

The Conservatives will argue that all this blood-letting will lead to higher growth in the private sector and we will all get richer as a result. But the omens are not good. The 2.7 per cent growth we had last year was from a very low base and it is already being scaled back. The rise in employment is based on sandy soil...low wages, part-time work, low investment

and low productivity. It also fails to include the young, 17 per cent of whom are unemployed and many more are working in jobs below their capabilities.

So will this SNP wave, dashing against the rocks of continuing austerity at Westminster, lead to a break-up of the United Kingdom ? It's possible but I don't think so. Nicola Sturgeon insisted throughout the campaign that this election was not about independence. It was about an end to austerity and a wish for a fairer society. But she also warned Westminster that "Scotland cannot be ignored." My guess therefore is that David Cameron will fulfil his famous "vow" to give more powers to the Scottish Parliament. But he will only go as far as the Smith Commission recommendations and wild talk of "a federal Britain" by luminaries, from Boris Johnston to Gordon Brown, will be quietly forgotten.

So we are entering an uneasy period for the United Kingdom, with Scotland a one-party state at odds with the rest of the nations, and the UK at odds with the rest of the European Union.

Looking back over the whole campaign, the undoubted star has been Nicola Sturgeon....young, fresh, female, feisty, positive, offering the only substantial alternative to the austerity of Labour and the Tories. Wise old Alex Salmond made a clever move when he resigned as leader of the SNP last year to allow her to give the party a new momentum. By contrast the unionist parties were negative, telling Scots what can't be done. The result was a tumbling of the stone giants of Labour's Jim Murphy, Douglas Alexander and Margaret Curran and the Liberal Democrats' Danny Alexander, Michael Moore, Jo Swinson and Charles Kennedy.



It's difficult to see where the unionist parties can go from here. Clearly they have to stop digging themselves deeper into

the ditch of austerity and negativity. Then they might wait for the SNP wave to pass over and dash itself out on the beach of time. And meanwhile they might contemplate how to make "home rule" work for the real issues that people care about....good jobs, a fair welfare system, better schools and health centres, solutions to the housing shortage, crime, energy, climate change and Britain's role in a world of international trade, poverty and tax avoidance, civil wars and terrorism.

It's been a curiously quiet election, considering the revolutionary result. No one has been hurt. No unscripted incidents have occurred. No furry animals have followed the leaders about. There have been no eccentric candidates. There were not many window posters, or lamp-post decorations, banned as they are across Edinburgh. I've heard no loud-speaker vans or seen many doorstep canvassers. The leaders' rallies, walkabouts and factory visits have been carefully staged-managed to avoid encounters with "ordinary" people.

Instead it's been a campaign fought on television, on the internet, and with leaflets through the letter-boxes. The live hustings I've been to have been quiet, well-behaved affairs. Even the old fashioned art of heckling has been lost. But in the end, the people have spoken clearly, especially in Scotland, and left us with plenty of things to think about.

A terrible beauty is born.