

Edinburgh International Book Festival: Iain Macwhirter



‘A tsunami is the result of an earthquake; Scotland’s earthquake was the independence referendum campaign’

✖ According to chair **Magnus Linklater**, **Iain Macwhirter** is ‘one of the best informed people on Scottish politics that you’re likely to meet’.

He’s also, of course, *The Herald’s* political commentator and the author of *Road to Referendum* and *Disunited Kingdom*. Iain was at the **2016 Edinburgh International Book Festival** to discuss *Tsunami: Scotland’s Democratic Revolution*, his book about the SNP’s resounding success in the 2015 General Election, in which ‘Scotland (was) swept by an unprecedented wave of yellow’.

Why, asks Magnus, did it happen? Were voters swayed by nationalism, or was something else behind this seismic shift – an average swing of 30% in almost every Scottish mainland constituency?

Margaret Thatcher, says Iain, had a lot to do with it. ✖ After several hundred years of relative acceptance of the Union, events in Westminster in the 1990s led Scotland to start to question its position – its moral commitment to this strange political marriage began to wane. Whilst many Scots favoured what Iain terms ‘existential nationalism’ – a romantic ideal – others simply felt that the UK no longer offered them what they wanted; it could no longer sustain their ambitions.

The collapse of Labour has in his view also fuelled the SNP’s spectacular rise (its membership has quadrupled since the 2014

Referendum). As Labour appeared to move steadily to the right, the SNP – then led by **Alex Salmond** – adopted the policies that Labour had abandoned. Scottish party leader **Jim Murphy** purported to support ‘devo max’, but Iain (and, it seems, most of Scotland) was unconvinced;

‘The image I have is of a female impersonator with all the right clothes but with stubble still on his chin’




Scottish Labour’s current leader, **Kezia Dugdale**, has so far been unable to resolve the question of the party’s identity north of the border, and its one remaining MP, **Ian Murray**, opposes the renewal of Trident, ‘he’s a special case’.



And of course, the SNP’s ace card has to be its leader, ‘an extraordinary phenomenon’ to whom the response on the streets is, says, Iain, ‘amazing... people fall in love with her’. Unlike her predecessor (and indeed many of her supporters) though, **Nicola Sturgeon** is no romantic.

Her nationalism is ‘utilitarian’, a means to an end, and that end is social justice. If she sees that this goal would be better achieved in another way, that is the option she will pursue; she has just announced a big push to close the educational attainment gap, a mammoth task by itself – and few would deny that much inequality stems from the divisive nature of the educational system.


Was Sturgeon, Magnus asks, caught out by Brexit as much as **Boris Johnson** was? Did she really anticipate a ‘material change of circumstances’ so soon? Possibly, says Iain, and she certainly won’t be rushed into a referendum unless she thinks the time has come when Scotland can exist independently.

Labour may be in a mess, but things are changing. In the 

most recent Scottish Parliamentary elections the SNP did not win an overall majority, and although the party still dominates Scottish politics, for the first time in living memory the Tories have become the official opposition in Holyrood. Their leader, **Ruth Davidson**, ran a very different campaign from the standard blue rinse and pearls brigade, her literature hardly mentioned the Conservative Party and her posters often weren't even blue. Does she represent the possibility of a genuine Tory revival in Scotland? ('NO' stage whispers the man sitting next to me, and his opinion is echoed around the room.)

Meanwhile **Jeremy Corbyn** was elected Labour Party leader with one of the largest majorities ever, the party is starting to reappraise its old policies and, Iain suggests, as the Labour Party edges leftwards the SNP may be moving in the opposite direction. Sturgeon no longer plans to increase taxes on the rich ('because then they'll all leave the country'), **Angus Robertson** said only three days ago that a second independence referendum will be lost 'if voters believe they will be poorer' – whilst at the same time even Corbyn's 'moderate' opponent **Owen Smith** says he favours increased public borrowing and higher taxes, policies that would have been anathema to Tony Blair. Everywhere the sands are shifting; many people voted SNP because they wanted a real social democracy – but who is the most socialist now?

✘ As for the EU, Iain does not accept that an independent Scotland would find it hard to rejoin – but he does raise the interesting question of whether it should. 'Many people regard the EU as a bankers' union'. **Norway** – often cited as a social democracy that Scotland could copy – has never been in the EU. What's more, Norway separated peacefully from Sweden in 1905, a process that Iain describes as 'incremental independence' – the country gaining more and more 'functional' independence *before* it held a referendum, with the result that 99% of the population voted in favour – they could already see

that it worked. There's little doubt that Brexit has given  the independence movement an enormous boost – many voted no in 2014 simply because they didn't want to give up EU membership, a membership that now appears to have been given up for them;

'Scotland will be cut off in the most obvious and severe way by remaining part of the UK'.

Project Fear, an audience member points out, has already reared its head again, with the **Royal Bank of Scotland** apparently threatening to 'leave Scotland' if independence becomes a reality. 90% of the bank's activities, Iain says, are already taking place in the City of London under the **NatWest** umbrella – indeed RBS has become so toxic a brand that no-one wants to use it. RBS also has a vast number of sub-prime lending claims to answer in the US. If the bank wants to 'leave' Scotland 'many people would say "good riddance"'.

We are, concludes Iain, living through huge social change;

'The fact that the people of Scotland are not out on the streets fighting does not alter the fact that what we have is a revolution'.

What the outcome of that revolution will be has yet to be seen, but the excellence of Iain Macwhirter's incisive commentary and analysis is unquestionable.

Tsunami: Scotland's Democratic Revolution by **Iain Macwhirter** is published by **Freight Books** and costs £8.99.

