

Letter from Scotland

When Keir Hardie founded the Scottish Labour Party in 1888, I don't suppose he could have imagined how things would look this weekend when his party gathers in Glasgow for its annual conference.

It will be in buoyant mood after Labour's victory in the two by-elections in England on Thursday.

There won't be many cloth caps or battered deer-stalker hats in the hall. The present leader did not begin life working in a Lanarkshire coal mine from the age of 10. Anas Sarwar is the son of a prosperous Glasgow businessman Mohammad Sarwar, Britain's first Muslim MP and now Governor of the Punjab.

VOTE FOR

Home Rule.

Democratic
Government.

Justice to Labour

No Monopoly.

No Landlordism



Temperance
Reform.

Healthy Homes.

Fair Rents.

Eight-Hour Day.

Work for the
Unemployed.

KEIR HARDIE.

1895 poster

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The rise in Labour support in Scotland has got little to do with what the Scottish party itself has done, except not committed any major blunders. It's got everything to do with the misdeeds of the Conservatives at Westminster and the mistakes of the SNP at Holyrood.

Which is disappointing to those of us who would like to see positive politics. But Labour doesn't seem to have the courage of Keir Hardie in saying what it actually stands for. And the confusion has led to subtle differences between Sir Keir Starmer's Labour and Scottish Labour.

On Gaza, for example, Labour MSPs joined the majority of the Scottish Parliament in calling for an immediate cease-fire, while Sir Keir backs the UK and American call for temporary pauses in the fighting. There is a Scottish rebellion over limits to welfare benefits for families with more than two children. Then there is Sir Keir's retreat from his promise to spend £28bn a year on environmental projects. Anas Sarwar was left vaguely suggesting that some projects could do ahead, like a public energy company based in Scotland.

But where Scottish Labour most lacks courage is in its attacks on the SNP government. They usually involve calling for more public spending but without saying where that should come from. You get the feeling that Scottish Labour would like to end "austerity" by borrowing more or taxing more, but they daren't say it out loud.

Instead we got this week a promise of a "reset" of the relationship between government and business, whatever that may mean. And a suggestion from Gordon Brown's "Future Scotland" think tank that we need an alternative to the council tax after the next election. But of course it's not disclosed what that might be.

It leaves Labour unable to take a clear stand on the clash between Scotland's 32 local councils and the SNP/Green government. It came to a head this week with the councils saying they cannot implement the government's foolhardy promise of a council tax freeze without more than the £144m compensation on offer.

As to the issue of Scottish independence, that has not gone

away. It's still a potent force for the SNP with a steady 48 per cent support for the idea in the opinion polls. The problem for Scottish Labour is that for all its efforts to promise more powers for The Scottish Parliament and a "federal style" Britain, it has not managed to defuse the issue.

No doubt this weekend's conference will be a triumph of hope – hope that Labour will win the general election later this year. But I cannot see Anas Sarwar's foreword to the conference agenda coming true: "The age of the politics of division is coming to a close."



Scottish Labour leader, Anas Sarwar PHOTO © The Edinburgh Reporter