

Letter from Scotland

My personal anecdote about Alex Salmond concerns a visit he made to the Gaelic school Sabhal Mor Ostaig in Skye when he was first minister. "Hey, First Minister, I like your tie," an American student called out. Whereupon, Salmond took off his Saltire tie and gave it to him with a triumphant smile.

He'd just delivered a short speech, partly in "Gaelic" which no one at the school could understand. "You can't blame me for trying," said Salmond, again with a winning smile.



“The dream shall never die.” Alex Salmond 1954-2024.
Photo: Alan Simpson

He had a public charm and could easily converse with people, high and low. Lowlands Scots, I suppose, was his native tongue and a quote from Robert Burns was never far away. As a journalist, I interviewed him several times and I always found him genuine and direct.

His achievements have been well recorded in the days since his sudden death last Saturday while attending a conference in North Macedonia. He led the SNP from obscurity and into 17 years of government. He increased support for independence from 14 per cent to 45 per cent and engineered the referendum in 2014. He was a gifted public speaker and a feisty debater. He served as an MP at Westminster for 25 years and was first minister of Scotland for seven years. I think, however, that his lasting achievement has been to underline the fact that the UK is made up of four nations, not one, and that local rights and cultures should be honoured and cherished, and power devolved.

Of course, Alex Salmond, had his flaws. Power corrupts, and in

his later years he became a little too triumphant and pompous. He drank unwisely, and that led him into “inappropriate behaviour” towards some women – though he was cleared of all criminal charges brought against him. He also became bitter towards his protégé Nicola Sturgeon and went off to found his own Alba party. It is the great tragedy of the independence movement that these two outstanding leaders fell out. It has put back their cause by at least 20 years.

The SNP under John Swinney has been left picking up the pieces. The general election in the summer saw the number of SNP MPs fall dramatically from 48 to just 9. Wisely, Swinney has been switching his message away from independence for its own sake and explaining that it is the means by which Scotland can tackle its big problems, like child poverty, poor public services, lack of well-paying jobs, the transition from oil and gas to wind power.

This of course is an implicit criticism of the Westminster governments, Conservative and now Labour. So although both sides are talking about a new spirit of co-operation, the relationship is uneasy. This week, for instance, we saw the UK energy secretary Ed Milliband visit Aberdeen, soon to be the headquarters of Great British Energy, the state agency in charge of the transition to renewables. He announced a new “passport” to make it easier for workers in the off-shore oil industry to transfer to off-shore wind.

Such small steps are all well and good, but the two governments remain divided over new oil exploration. Labour wants to end it now, with no new licences given. The SNP doesn't want to lose support in the North East and says it will judge each application on its merits. It will be interesting to see how the two governments co-operate over the closure Scotland's last oil refinery at Grangemouth. It should of course be celebrated as the end of the oil era but how will the 400 workers transfer to the new age of renewable energy ?

Going back to Alex Salmond's attempt at Gaelic, he had a Lowlander's appreciation of the value of the language, now one of UNESCO's endangered languages. The latest census found that although more people have "some skills" in the language (2.5 per cent), fewer people are actually speaking it day-by-day. There are only 60,000 speakers left. Even in its heartland of the Western Isles, less than half the people use Gaelic in daily conversation.

A lot however is being done to address the "cugallach" (fragility) of the Gaelic language. The recorded increase in skills is due to the rise of Gaelic medium schools and in on-line teaching courses like Duolingo. The Alba TV channel and Gaelic rock bands have given the language popular status. Scottish Parliament is in the process of passing a Scottish Languages Bill which will give Gaelic and Scots official status.

And of course, there is the MOD, the annual music and cultural festival of Gaelic which has been held this week in Oban. Around 10,000 participants have flooded the town – choirs, individual singers, fiddlers, pipers, and admiring audiences.

And as they return home this weekend, they at least have underlined the fact that Britain is made up of many nations and many cultures.