

The 2011 Scottish General Election: Implications for Scotland and for Britain

Written by Danus G. M. Skene

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DANUS G. M. SKENE, MAY 19 2011

“A Political Tsunami”

Once upon a time, at the UK General Election of February 1974, I was the Labour candidate in a seat called at that time Kinross & West Perthshire. The sitting MP was Sir Alec Douglas Home. A few years before, he had been British Prime Minister, and at the time of this election was Conservative Foreign Secretary. It was one of the weakest two or three seats in Scotland for Labour, and I would be doing very well to get 10% of the vote. The late Willie Hamilton, Labour MP and politician, told me before the election that he refused to wish me luck. If I won Kinross for Labour, we would be living in a one party state, and he didn't want that. As it was, I came last of 4 candidates with 9.9% of the vote. Alec Home won with 53%.

On 5 May, Scotland came close to becoming a one-party state. It is alleged that when First Minister and Scottish National Party (SNP) leader, Alex Salmond, was told that the SNP had won Clydebank – solidly Labour for 90 years and not a Nationalist target in their wildest dreams – all he could come out with was an unprintable expletive, some sort of updated version of Willie Hamilton's message to me 37 years before. Polls closed at 10 pm on Thursday last, and the first results began to emerge at about 2 am on the Friday. It soon became apparent that something extraordinary was going on. As recently as February, opinion polls put Labour 8-10% ahead of the SNP, but a good few weeks' campaigning had swung that around so that the SNP were 5% or more ahead of Labour, and would probably be able to form another minority Government. But much more was happening.

Alex Neil used to be in the Labour Party. When I took on Alec Home in 1974, Alex was Assistant Secretary of the Labour Party Scottish headquarters. Now he was the SNP (Nationalist) candidate for Airdrie and expected to lose. He came through with a 9% margin of victory, and in his acceptance speech coined the slightly unfortunate phrase “political tsunami.” The swing from Labour to SNP was 5.5% in Airdrie, but that turned out to be one of the lowest swing figures anywhere as Labour's historic dominance in central Scotland was cut to 14 seats. The Liberal Democrats were almost annihilated, and the Conservatives held on a little better than others, losing only two seats. Jean Urquhart, another SNP candidate, was so far down the party's additional member list, and the SNP had done so well in the constituency vote, that she went to bed quite quietly, and on Friday morning was getting on with her job as a local Councillor and running a cafe business when she nearly had a heart attack on being told that she was elected as an MSP. In the secret recesses of their collective mind, Scots voters had contrived a revolution.

The SNP won 54 seats (constituencies) out of 73, leaving Labour with 14, the Conservatives (“Tories”) with 3, and the Liberal Democrats with 2. In Scotland, we have a proportional system, whereby after the 73 constituencies elect their representatives, 56 “Additional Members” are allocated relative to the total votes cast. Going through the details of the quite complex arithmetic of the de Hondt system would prove boring, but it is essentially a compensatory system. A party receives extra members of Parliament (“MSPs”) in accordance with its overall vote, taking into account the number of MSPs that it had already seen elected in the 73 constituencies. This system was adopted when the Scottish Parliament was re-established in 1999 with the deliberate intention that, in a country with 4 or 5 political parties of substance, it would mean that no single party ever got an absolute majority in the Parliament. But the SNP vote was so strong at about 45% of all votes cast that they secured 16 further seats

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compared to the further 40 for all other parties.

Final result: SNP 69, Labour 37, Conservative 15, Liberal Democrat 5, Green 2, and 1 Independent (the redoubtable Margot MacDonald).

It doesn't matter how many stories I tell you or how many figures I throw at you. I don't think that I can adequately describe the extent and power of the tsunami, and its effects. Scotland, and indeed England and the rest of Britain, are essentially conservative countries in their political habits. Things change slowly, and in a way that the rest of the world finds amusingly understated. But this is landmark stuff. The great British landmark elections of the 20th century are usually taken to be the Liberal landslide of 1906, which saw the end of serious power for the House of Lords and the introduction of income tax to enable an old age state pension for everyone, and the Labour victory of 1945. In 1945, the returning troops were quietly determined that peace would mean a new Britain. The Welfare State was created, built around the National Health Service. Churchill, winning the war and losing the peace, simply didn't see it coming.

This historic Scottish election is that big. It will change Scottish political references and assumptions for all time, whatever now happens. It is also likely to change Britain ("the UK") permanently, as Scottish independence becomes a real option on the agenda, signalling an end to the 400-year-old concept of a multinational and imperial British state. The past thirty years have seen the gradual emergence of a distinct Scottish political system, propelled by Scottish collective revulsion at the policies of the Thatcher government of the 1980s, and consolidated by the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. This election is a further sharp move in the parting of the London and Edinburgh tectonic plates! Maybe geologically rooted terms such as tsunami are indeed appropriate. At any rate, it is hard to think of the drift of political reference points that is going on just now actually ever being thrown into reverse.

What is Scottish Independence?

The SNP's primary purpose, the reason for its existence, is to achieve independence for Scotland. Does this election mean that independence has happened? No. Does it mean that independence is likely to happen in due course? Very probably. It is worth taking a moment to reflect on the word "independence." What does it mean in practice? The first things that come to mind are symbolic: flags, embassies, currencies, armies. A place in the UN between Saudi Arabia and Senegal.

The reality is a little more muddled and subtle. There has been, over the past forty years or so, a gradual sense of deterioration of the "United Kingdom." My father, who lived from 1912 until 1981, fought in the British army, in a regiment that wore the kilt. His country was Britain. Britain fought the war against Hitler. Britain had a worldwide empire. He was a fiercely loyal Scot when, for example, Scotland played England in a football match, and he would have agreed that the British identity was complex, made up as it is of four different nationalities. But the idea of the British state, the "United Kingdom," actually coming to an end precipitated by Scottish independence would have seemed absurd to him. I actually think he would have been confused, or even offended by last week's election result, just as his generation tended to find Irish independence offensive.

One aspect of the increased differentiation of identities within the UK has been the changing of the international context since the 1960s, by which time my father's world view would have been irrevocably formed. Worldwide empire has ended, and the European Union has become an important reality. Now, Scotland is no longer England's junior partner in an imperial state that has been a globally dominant superpower. It is now a junior and often excluded part of a middle-sized European country that doesn't fully understand its new and relatively diminished place in the world. If Slovakia and Luxembourg, which don't even have coastlines, can sit at the table that determines European fisheries policy, why cannot Scotland be there, home as it is to something like a third of European fisheries resources?

Slowly, Scots have meandered to the view that their own country – Scotland, not Britain – should be the forum for decision-making. Sometimes this view has lurched forwards, as when Scotland felt itself under attack from what it

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saw as Thatcher's determination to destroy our national and local sense of community. Sometimes, things have seemed stable, and the whole constitutional debate has gone to sleep. And there have indeed been symbolic moments, most obviously when Blair's new Labour Government re-established the Scottish Parliament. (This, I believe, they did for the positive reason of giving the country democratically accountable control over its distinctive features such as its legal and educational systems, but also negatively, because they thought that would kill Scottish nationalism stone dead).

What I am trying to convey is that it has not been the symbolic moments that matter, it is the "facts on the ground" of the things that Scotland has increasingly and quietly been doing in its own way, and the evolution of a political map in the heads of the Scottish people that helps them to take their increasing differentiation from the rest of the UK for granted. My father's generation were British unionists because no alternative was conceivable. Now there is a different option available, and increasingly in people's minds.

For the past four years, Salmond's SNP minority Government has developed the facts-on-the-ground very effectively and cleverly. They have managed Scotland within the limited existing powers of the Scottish Parliament and government machinery very well, better than their predecessors. This recent electoral triumph is built on a recognition of that by the public, together with a mounting acceptance of the argument of "See how we have managed with so little authority. Now just think what we could do with real power, such as proper Scottish control over taxation."

If full "independence" comes, there will no doubt be a moment that is about flags and UN places. But that will be a confirmation of what is happening anyway, as Scottish autonomy moves along a continuum that runs from provincial British status to splendid sovereign isolation. Those who oppose independence in Scotland talk not of independence but of "separation," and what they in fact mean is a degree of rejection of the rest of the world that almost nobody wants, and certainly not the SNP leadership. The independence of every country in the world is limited in various ways, and Scotland's independence will be highly qualified, not just by membership of the European Union, but by the perfectly sensible persistence of co-operation on a range of issues with the other British countries. Splendid isolation is not an option. But such internationalism will only be made possible by a national autonomy in the first place that allows open relationships between sovereign equals.

British Unionism

It seems certain to me that this election will change the grounds of the debate about Scotland's status. The key question to Nationalists, regarded until now in London and even by many elite Scots as a fringe movement, has for 40 years been "Do you really want to break up the UK? Why?" And Nationalists have given a variety of answers, talking about cultural identity, economic self-management and the promotion of enterprise, the end of imperialism, Europe, and even specific topics such as the presence of nuclear weapons ("Trident") and the future of renewable energy.

Now, the Scots electorate has largely caught up with the facts-on-the-ground, and the key question will change. "What is the Union for?" will become the question that needs answering if the UK is indeed to survive. In recent years, this is not a question that anyone has made much attempt to answer. There is rhetoric about the whole being more than the sum of its parts. There is invocation of tradition, including the monarchy. There are even occasional attempts to invoke a kind of British nationalism, asserting, as was natural 60 years ago, that Britain is a single country and a proper focus of patriotism. This last line doesn't go down very well in Scotland any more: we are all too aware that the English still cannot or at any rate do not make a distinction between Englishness and Britishness. From a Scottish perspective, next year's London Olympics looks more and more like Unionist propaganda.

What is needed, if the coming debate is to be intelligent, is a clear making of the case for the Union. What in particular are the economic and security arguments for it? Cursing "separatism" will no longer stem the flow of what is happening in Scotland. Many of those who voted SNP on 5 May are not yet ready to vote for independence, but they have given themselves permission to ask the question, and are no longer satisfied by being told that their Scottishness is just for the football field. But a few more years of SNP government and they will indeed vote for independence unless someone tells them clearly what the Union is actually for that is in Scotland's interest.

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This intellectual failure of British Unionism brings us back to 5 May Scottish general election. Maybe it's not so much that the SNP pulled off a blinder, but that the other "Unionist" parties got it very wrong. There's something in that. Speaking for myself, I was happy for almost 30 years to express myself in the context of Liberal Democrat politics. The party advocated the kind of society that I wanted to live in, and espoused federalism, meaning that due account would be taken of local, Scottish, British and European realities. Different things should be decided at different levels. The events of 5 May made me reflect on the fact that it would be from about 1976 that I would have voted for Scottish independence in any straight posing of the question. But that didn't make me an SNP supporter, as until recently I had found that party to fall too easily into a kind of exclusivist "wha's like us" culture that didn't promise the kind of Scotland I want.

My federalism is about "Scotland in Europe," and as the importance of the British dimension faded in my mind, so the Liberal Democrat party started to focus on it more, until after the 2007 election the party leadership in Scotland openly took to talking of itself as Unionist. They were sailing in exactly the opposite direction to myself – and also, it turns out, in the opposite direction to huge numbers of Scots. And it is the same with Labour and its Unionist declarations. Those who have ambitions for Scotland now have little alternative but to vote SNP, and sort out later the more particular kind of Scotland that they want. The Unionist parties are in a dead-end street, and more and more Scots feel that way about them.

Just a short comparative aside about Canada. When the Scottish Parliament was re-established, the thought went out that we were entering our "Quebec phase." Canada's federal system gives Quebec considerable autonomy, in practice rather more than the other provinces because of the Francophone community's distinctive history and demands. A clear strike for independence always remained possible, and at one point a referendum came within a whisker of a majority for negotiating a new status based on the assumption of Quebec sovereignty. But the situation ground on in a sort of perpetual tension, sometimes creative, and sometimes a thorough frustration to everybody. In 1999, that seemed a likely outcome for Scotland. There was de facto federalism. Like Quebec, Scotland would perhaps toy with the threat of independence in order to get the most out of the Union, but surely they wouldn't carry out the threat. England would grudgingly tolerate her tantrum-prone junior partner. Everyone would learn to live with an in-built tension, and try to make it creative.

Now, suddenly, the comparison seems not to hold. Scotland appears set to push on to a next stage. Almost simultaneously, the Canadian general election of 3 May 2011 seems, from this distance, to show Quebec throwing in the towel. The tectonic plates there seem to be nudging together again. Just as the imperial concept of "Britain," invented 400 years ago by King James, is fading into tired irrelevance, "Canada" is finding its feet as a vibrant nation to which its people actively want to subscribe.

The SNP Now

Something in me has always wished that the SNP didn't exist. Nationalism, in Europe, has been a deeply destructive force perhaps as frequently as it has been a liberating one. If only we could have moved our political perspective from the imperial Britain to the national Scotland in some agreed way, with a party system representing the range of views across the conventional political spectrum and acting consensually on constitutional evolution. On that basis, I have been a "maximalist" on the constitutional issue, first in the Labour Party and then as a Liberal.

Naive me! The dramatic arrival of Scottish nationalism in the UK Parliament with Winnie Ewing's by-election victory at Hamilton in 1968, and the subsequent SNP surge of the 1970s had a direct effect. The other parties pulled down the shutters and became assertively Unionist – though perhaps only partly so in the case of the federalist Liberals. As I have already suggested, the SNP that emerged from that period and retained a power base in eastern and north-eastern Scotland was not a pretty beast. "Hard" in tone, exclusive in its nationalism, and somewhat given to cultivating a chip-on-the-shoulder Scottish identity, it was also unclear where it stood on a range of social issues. Was it Left, Right or Centre, or just postponing hard realities until the dream of independence was fulfilled? This could be a dangerous form of nationalism.

However, the SNP that brought the 5 May general election tsunami has evolved hugely. It is an overtly social

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democrat party, pitching just to the left of centre at the balancing point of Scottish political gravity and in direct competition with the Labour Party. Its policy choices are clear. Over 30 or 40 years, the party has learned that it will not achieve its primary objective unless it competes for power in Scotland, and demonstrates that it can manage well when it is successful. SNP Councillors are doing a sound job across Scotland's local government, and the process has culminated in a very creditable performance over the past four years as a minority government of Scotland based on a group of 47 MSPs. The Scottish public have re-elected them to carry on with that competence. The party itself has changed. I recognise the rather embittered exclusivists in parts of Scotland where the SNP has been long established – watching a local by-election in Moray last November was rather depressing on that count. But in the areas of Scotland where the party has now broken through against a Labour establishment, and against long-established Liberal Democrats in the North, the SNP presents itself as a new, open, talented organisation.

The actual campaigning capacity of the SNP in this election showed it to be as sophisticated as any political organisation in the world. The Activate database crunched numbers to bring targeted campaigning to specific places and demographic groups. E-mails, texts, and blogs flew out to all the right people. People to deliver paper and talk to voters were generally available at the right times and places – certainly more so than for other parties. Mike Russell, and now Peter Murrell, should take huge credit as the builders of this machine over the past generation. Policy is in place, with a positive manifesto, and a high reputation in the civil service for providing ministers who know clearly what they want of their departments. Above all, there is leadership. Sure, there are plenty people around who think Alex Salmond is a smug so-and-so who deserves to slip on a banana skin or two. But I think there are fewer such people than there were, and the recognition of his competence and vision for the country is universal, even among those who do not share the vision.

What Happens Next?

And so, with what now seems like most other Scots, I go along with it. It feels a bit like the skier who has just pushed himself off down the runway to the ski jump. No turning back. We are heading for independence, with a promise that in 3 or 4 years a referendum question will ask the Scottish people whether they want the Government to start negotiation of independence with London. We are committed to a massive increase of sustainable (“green”) energy. We will try to get the nuclear submarines removed from Scottish waters. We will defend ourselves as best we can against the erosion of budgets coming from the UK Government. If you want to read all the smaller print, have a look at the SNP website.

A key reason why the SNP want to delay a referendum until towards the end of this Parliament is that they want time. Time to demonstrate further their competence and to win over more Scots to back independence. The percentage favouring independence in Scotland has fairly consistently stood at about 30% in recent years, and has not risen with the rise in support for the SNP to a higher figure. I suspect that this election result will itself lift the figure, and a referendum campaign certainly would, but support for independence is nonetheless certainly below 50%. Further, the SNP's tsunami still only brought them about 45% of the vote. They must not only consolidate support for their Government of Scotland into support for independence, they must go out and convert more people still. (A small minority of those who voted for other parties will, no doubt, be in favour of independence, and some minor parties, notably the Greens, are also in favour.)

Meanwhile, there is much middle-range work to do. The Unionist parties, through the work of the Calman Commission, over the past year drafted a set of proposals for increasing the powers of the Scottish Parliament. For most of the politicians involved, this was probably a matter of expecting that greater powers for the existing Parliament would undermine any appetite for independence, but there is a positive commitment to making the Scots more responsible for raising their own taxes rather than just spending their share of the UK money. An immediate priority is to beef up the provisions of the rather anaemic Scotland Bill in the UK Parliament that seeks to implement Calman. More tax powers will be demanded by Salmond, including crucially the transfer of decisions over Corporation Tax to Edinburgh, and the transfer of the Crown Estate in Scotland. (This last point would give the Scottish Government control over the seabed around the country, and hence over a key resource essential to renewable energy plans.)

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We also face the effects of ongoing recession. The cash available to Edinburgh will reduce, and the SNP Government will have real difficulty keeping its expenditure pledges, and in particular the pledge not to allow local property taxes to rise at all for five years. If the Labour Party were saying anything coherent at all in the recent election, it was to prioritise employment opportunity, including better skills training. The SNP shared this ambition, but the difference was that while Labour saw constitutional issues as a distraction from economic recovery, the SNP see constitutional evolution, with greater powers in Edinburgh, as essential to being able to do anything constructive. What is new to Scottish politics is that a significant slice of Scotland's business leadership is now aligned behind the SNP and independence, and small businesses through their organisations are finding this Government more helpful than its predecessors. Through the proposed device of the Scottish Futures Trust, the Government hopes to reinvigorate investment in Scotland's infrastructure, although this will require another major concession from the UK Treasury in allowing the Scottish Government to have borrowing powers. Another case of creating facts-on-the-ground.

There is an urgent sense that something massive happened on 5 May. I also find it hard to be wholly objective about these events. Independence has in my mind been a practical option for nearly 40 years. Since the Thatcher period, it has been a no-brainer. But that conviction has been clouded by persistent doubts about the SNP's nature and capability and by frustration with the other players. Now suddenly, independence is a likelihood. There is a new political landscape. As Yeats said of his beloved Ireland, "A terrible beauty is born." The beauty is indeed startling, but whether it is "terrible" will depend both on us in Scotland, and on the willingness of the rest of the world to let us find our own destiny.

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