

A Dispatch from the New Labour Wasteland

by Henry James (June 2015)

In my home town on the east coast of Scotland there was no shortage of graffiti in the run-up to last year's referendum on independence. The message was short and demanding: 'End London Rule!' Nine months later and these slogans have not yet faded. You can find them stencilled on walls, bins, on pavements, and even written through the dust on the back of white vans.

For a long time Angus was not an obvious stronghold of nationalism, just one of many largely rural counties across the UK that leaned towards the Tories. Returns for Labour were, and are, nothing to shout about. With the Conservatives a damaged brand in the aftermath of Thatcher, members of the Scottish National Party (SNP) were quick to move in and ingratiate themselves with the electorate. Before long they began to sweep up council seats. At the 1997 General Election Andrew Welsh won the Angus constituency. His successor Mike Weir went on to enjoy increased majorities. In 2010 the Conservative candidate Alberto Costa ran a spirited campaign and seemed to appear in the local papers every week – a guaranteed presence at any charity fundraiser, boot sale, or coffee morning. There was no doubt he wanted it badly. But in the end Weir romped to an easy victory. It must have been a bitter defeat for Costa, who had uprooted himself and his family from Glasgow to fight here in two successive elections. Not long afterwards the blogger Guido Fawkes reported on an event held at Westminster for all Tory candidates. Costa was apparently seen gulping down wine on a balcony, lamenting his failure to win for the second time.

That is not to say that Angus is a one-party state in miniature just yet. Conservatives are still elected to serve on local and county councils, although it is doubtful this will continue for much longer. The Scottish Tories, at least in my neck of the woods, now resemble a club for people who might be six feet under by the end of the decade. In that sense they are much like the Church of Scotland, whose elders are gradually dying off without the numbers available to fully replace them. It is hard to see how the Scottish Conservatives can avoid becoming another casualty of history. Members of Generation Y who are willing to don the blue rosette are conspicuous by their absence. Since the most recent General Election the Conservatives can count on the services of a solitary MP in Scotland, David Mundell. Mundell once again confounded expectations by resisting the SNP tide in Dumfriesshire. But only just – a mere 800 votes was the difference between victory and defeat. It would be a little unfair to

say that Scottish Toryism is dead and buried. It isn't quite dead, though nor is it entirely alive. It is undead and shuffles along hopelessly, waiting for the more agile nationalists to finally remove the head.

If the Conservatives received yet another drubbing north of the border then Labour were torn practically limb from limb. Whatever you might think about the SNP, they played an excellent long game. Slowly but surely they tempted away many traditional supporters of Scottish Labour, by portraying them as corrupt Westminster stooges who wanted nothing more than to use Scotland as a springboard to higher office. There is a certain irony in the pulverisation of Labour, for they found themselves at the receiving end of tactics they had helped to unleash. Treating Scotland as a personal fiefdom, Labour was happy to cast the Conservatives as an 'English' party who would fail to care about the Scots. And now, as some of the more hardcore nationalist supporters will attest, Labour have become the 'Red Tories' – the new bogeyman, the parcel of rogues willing to sell out Scotland for personal gain.

For those who cared to look the Labour collapse should have been expected, and need not have elicited such surprise from the English commentariat. At the 2011 Scottish Parliament Election Salmond's SNP won a majority for the first time, a triumph achieved by making inroads into the heartlands of Iain Gray's Scottish Labour. Gray, a charisma vacuum who lived up to his name, tendered his resignation soon afterwards. He barely held onto his own parliamentary seat, scraping home with a majority of only 151 votes. The lesson from this election was that the old electoral loyalties were starting to come apart. Labour candidates could no longer mouth a few platitudes in deprived inner city boroughs and watch the votes roll in, not when the Labour city council had controlled these areas for decades and failed to make them anything other than deprived inner city boroughs. It was a lesson that London Labour does not appear to have absorbed.

The SNP's main strength is that they are both establishment and anti-establishment. With victory in 2011 they had the freedom to implement their agenda, in a country that now enjoys a raft of devolved powers. They also had the freedom to deflect from any criticism or blame by pointing the finger at Westminster. The SNP are a polished political force, despite the occasional outbursts by some of their more eccentric backers, but retain the allure of the revolutionary upstart. They have successfully welded Nationalism with Left-Wing Populism, rendering Scottish Labour pointless. In the weeks before the General Election the new leader, Nicola Sturgeon, was consistently on message. The SNP propping up Labour at Westminster would lead to a new era of 'progressive' politics. (This word is very useful as it implies anyone who disagrees with you is against progress and therefore bad). However, the ruse seems to have backfired, as for every parliamentary bill the SNP could extract a hefty price. Many English

voters who weren't fooled by Sturgeon posturing as a selfless crusader for justice may have switched their votes to the Conservatives, helping to usher in a majority.

We will have to wait and see what happens next. A tussle between the new UK Government and the SNP over what more powers are to be transferred looks likely. Scotland is not independent, but with the conflation of the SNP with Scottishness itself it possesses a vigorous psychological independence. The schism that now exists between Scotland and the rest of the UK ensures that independence is not a matter of if but when. I have a strong feeling that the nationalist slogans scattered around the streets of my town will still be there in another nine months.

Henry James is a student of Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam.

To comment on this article, please click