

Michael Fry: Nicola Needs to Shift to the Right to Win Over Scots in Our Rural Areas

Michael Fry | 10th May 2017

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URBAN Scotland spoke quite loud and clear: victory for the SNP in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, with just a tiny wee setback in Dundee, but I don't think that city's political allegiance is much in doubt.

Rural Scotland sounded a more uncertain note: to be sure, widespread advance for the Tories, but not all that often even to a plurality of councillors in any particular local authority area, let alone to a majority. With four major parties in Scotland, outright wins and overall control are rare. In fact there were no examples of such a result this time.

The UK General Election in a month's time will be a different kettle of fish. First-past-the-post may be a system long overdue for reform, but it will retain to the end its virtue of giving clear results. When we go to the polls again on June 8, there can be all kinds of surges but they will not matter unless, at both the national and the constituency level, the tally of a single party among them exceeds by just one the total of votes for the next.

On this test, the SNP's position remains commanding. Measuring matters by seats won last Thursday, it maintained its lead over the Tories in every area but six: Aberdeenshire, Dumfries and Galloway, East Renfrewshire, Perth and Kinross, the Borders and South Ayrshire.

The predictive power of those results remains to be tested. Alex Salmond's constituency of Gordon lies within Aberdeenshire, for example, but somehow it is hard to see his lead in the seat of 21,000 over the Tory starting to vanish like snow off one of its dykes. Similarly in the Ayr constituency, which in its latest shape takes in South Ayrshire local authority, Corri Wilson starts off 15,000 votes ahead of her Tory challenger.

Realistic Tory prospects are therefore not numerous. One is Glasgow's answer to Surrey Hills or Westchester County or Neuilly-sur-Seine, the seat where the city's plutocrats live, here known otherwise as East Renfrewshire.

Pollsters' graveyard

Won in recent times by three different parties at different levels, it has turned into a graveyard for pollsters: anything could happen.

The rest of the Tory prospects are rustic rather than suburban, showing Caledonia not stern and wild but in the guise of a green and pleasant land, with prosperous farms, sturdy peasantry and bustling burghs – also, in some spots, communities of white settlers to complicate the political picture.

It is such places that will most clearly define the outcome of the General Election in Scotland, and the credibility of the parties wishing to claim victory as the sun rises on June 9. In these rustic seats the Labour party has never been in contention since universal suffrage arrived almost a century ago: during the whole of that time, they have elected only a single Labour MP (Russell Brown in Dumfries). Meanwhile, Liberal ascendancy has come and gone, and for the foreseeable future appears to be gone. If in this small category

of constituencies a rising Tory tide is to be stopped, then the SNP is the party that has to do it. Otherwise it is the nationalist tide that people will say has turned.

General Elections are fought mainly on national issues, so it is hard to tweak a campaign towards minorities. But for the sake of its overall performance, the SNP would be well advised not to concentrate as heavily as it usually does on the interests, or the supposed interests, of the Central Belt of Scotland, in other words on a programme of the highest possible public expenditure with official interference in every area of public and private life, under the assumption that government is in principle omnipotent. Some of my fellow columnists on this paper would define that type of Scottish politics as socialist, though I find rather tenuous its connection with any form of socialism that has been actually existent. There is a closer resemblance to the pork-barrel politics of the poorer states in the US.

For present purposes the real point is that politics on this pattern is profoundly unattractive in the crucial rustic seats that the SNP needs to defend. These have no huge council housing schemes or direct labour departments, so no legions of tenants and workers directly dependent for a living on the public sector. On the contrary, the voters are much more likely to work for themselves, and to display a sturdy independence bolstered by healthy scepticism about what other people promise to do for them.

Traditional virtues

In other words, they still represent what used to be regarded as traditional Scottish virtues of self-reliance, self-respect and self-sufficiency before they were overlain by the modern dependency culture.

While readers may dimly recognise my own prejudices at work here, let me say I would not expect Nicola Sturgeon's government to abandon its habitual leftist political line, and for both strategic and tactical reasons do not think it would be wise to try. But it is the Scottish National Party she represents, after all, not the Govan or even the Glasgow National Party. There is not a word in its constitution that says it has to be socialist, and the same document is if anything anti-statist.

What we need is a better balance among the interests of the various parts of a country amazingly diverse for its small size. I do not think it should be too hard to find such a balance, but at the moment balance is not what we are maintaining – with the result that certain regions, some of which have been loyally voting SNP for 30 years, show symptoms of slipping from its grasp.

Where do we look for a better balance? We need more stress on the individual rather than the state, on enterprise rather than dependency, on the successful rather than the unsuccessful, on nonconformity rather than ingratiation. If that seems provocative, put yourself in the position of, say, a small businessman or businesswoman in Inverurie, struggling amid the crash in oil prices, worried about survival but unconvinced that bigger government is the remedy. I'm not at all sure he or she would think the talk from Nicola Sturgeon sweeter than the talk from Theresa May.

We often find that victorious political leaders are the ones who manage to move on to the enemy's territory. The supreme example at present is Angela Merkel, leader of a conservative party that, from defence to immigration, has stolen the clothes of its social democratic opponents and seems set for a fourth victory at the German General Election later this year. She is obviously a model for Theresa May too, who has used the

opportunity of Labour's collapse to start talking about industrial strategies and workers' rights.

Nicola Sturgeon should emulate these successful models, except that she needs to move from the left to the right rather than the other way round. Out there beyond her present constituency of voters there are many Scots quite amenable to the idea of independence – though not if it means also an attempt at socialism, whatever that may mean nowadays. These are the people from the Bullers of Buchan to the Rhinns of Galloway who voted SNP at the last UK General Election but Tory on Thursday. There is still time to influence their choice on June 8.