

Gordon Craigie



An independent mind...



Niccolò Machiavelli. Credit: Peace Palace Library, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

This month, I'm taking inspiration from songs, fantasy, and a sixteenth century book...

SUMMERTIME, and the livin' is easy... well, about as easy as it's ever going to be while Scotland remains shackled to Broken Brexit Britain! Already the party of the working class – pause for ironic laughter – has demonstrated that it's happy to renege on its pre-election promises and continue to pursue a neoliberal, right-of-centre, austerity agenda that's frighteningly similar to the blue-tinged one we've endured for the previous 14 years. *Meet the new boss, same as the old boss...* and, sadly, it looks like the electorate have been fooled again!

But... *winter is coming!* Aye, I've moved on from quoting song lyrics to quoting a recurring line from a fantasy TV series, *Game of Thrones*. Why? Well, against our better judgement, this summer has seen our household embark on the entire DVD box set. I've never been interested in fantasy or sci-fi, but so many friends reacted with horror when we said we'd never watched it that eventually we were forced to submit, if only to find out what all the fuss was about.

Interestingly, the series actually started filming in 2010, around the same time the Tories came into power... winter certainly was coming!

And so, a mere 13 years after the show premiered, we've now ploughed our way all the way through to Series 6 – never let it be said that we're not in tune with the zeitgeist! And the unanimous verdict of our household is... what a complete load of preposterous nonsense! However, in the spirit of the late Magnus Magnusson, we've started so we'll finish, and we will struggle through the remaining three seasons, but it'll be a sair fecht indeed. Interestingly, the series actually started filming in 2010, around the same time the Tories came into power... winter certainly was coming!

Game of Thrones is based on a series of fantasy novels by the American author George R. R. Martin and, as the oracle (?) that is Wikipedia describes, "aspects of the novels' plots and their adaptations are based upon settings, characters, and events in European history". We certainly felt that many of the plot lines had relevance to the history of Scotland's relationship with England, with the "greater" southern power devolving the administration of "the north" to a lesser noble family while utilising the north's resources and people to defend the capital and its people. The southern elite also talk disparagingly of those in the north, mocking their accents, clothing, behaviour, and culture, while simultaneously depending on those same people in times of trouble when they are under threat of attack. Schrödinger's Scotland strikes again!

Anyway, all of that is a wee bit of a digression – surely not? – to introduce the point of this month's ramble. Much of the behaviour of the characters in *Game of Thrones* may be reasonably described as being *Machiavellian*, just as the behaviour of many of our current, and previous, politicians is similarly "explained" by those supposedly "in the know". Indeed, to behave in a *Machiavellian* way has become almost a trope in modern day political discourse. But what does that actually mean? I don't think most political commentators, or politicians, really know. How many of them have actually read *Il Principe*, (*The Prince*), by Niccolò Machiavelli?



GAME OF THRONES

There are many translations into English of *The Prince* – there is some scholarly debate as to whether it was originally written in Latin or an early form of Italian – and perhaps different conclusions can be drawn from different translations. I chose to read the 2009 Penguin Classics version by Tim Parks, partly because it was reviewed as a more modern translation but also because Parks is one of my favourite authors and an acknowledged expert on all aspects of Italian culture. In his introduction, Parks gives an outline of Machiavelli's life:

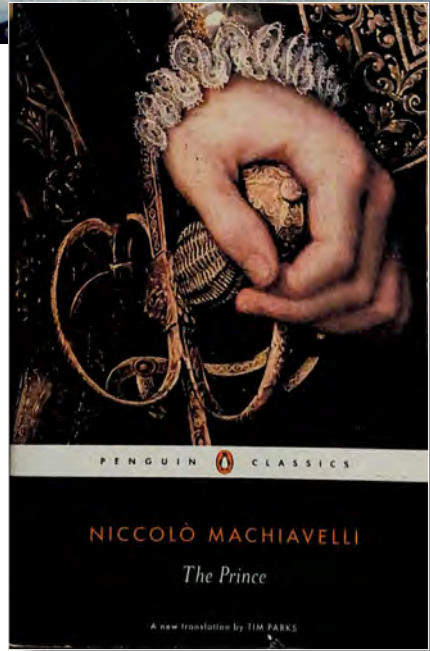
Niccolò Machiavelli was born in Florence in 1469. He served the Florentine republic as a secretary and second chancellor, as ambassador and foreign-policy maker, but when the Medici family returned to power in 1512, he was suspected of conspiracy, imprisoned and tortured and forced to withdraw from public life. He retired to his farm ... and spent his time studying and writing. His most famous work, The Prince, was written in an attempt to gain favour with the Medicis and return to politics ... [he] died in 1527, after a brief return to public life.

And, in a 2009 interview, Parks explains the relevance of Machiavelli's work to the present day:

Machiavelli isolates the problem of collective psychology and individual psychology – the psychology of leadership, loyalty, the best way to arrive at situations where people will do what you want, be faithful, and how you can be their leader. Since those are the issues, he begins to isolate as crucial to success, any leader can learn from what he's saying. Any ordinary person who's dealing with leaders can learn. It's one of the great handbooks of all time, not necessarily for how to become a monomaniac, but what it means to negotiate relations of leaderships and serving leaders.

There have been many different, often contradictory, interpretations of *The Prince*, and Machiavelli's motivation for the book. Parks quotes the Welsh philosopher Bertrand Russell, as describing it as "a handbook for gangsters", yet explains that while the religious and monarchic establishment tried to discredit the book, allegedly for praising ruthless behaviour in a ruler, they ignored

My dog-eared copy of The Prince, Penguin Classics Edition, written by Niccolò Machiavelli, translated by Tim Parks



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Machiavelli's opinion that, "in the long run a ruler must avoid being hated by his people and must always put their interests before those of the aristocracy; the people are so many, Machiavelli reflected, that power ultimately lies with them". However, at the same time, "liberal and left-wing thinkers" – such as the Swiss philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau; the Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza; and the Greek-Italian writer, revolutionary, and poet, Ugo Foscolo – interpreted *The Prince* as being in itself, "a Machiavellian ruse: the author had only pretended to give lessons to kings whereas in fact his real aim was to teach people to be free by showing them that royal power was no more than subterfuge".

Either way, in 1515, the bold Niccolò sent his manuscript to his prince, Lorenzo de' Medici, as "advice" as to how best Lorenzo should govern his peoples. Whether Lorenzo ever read the book or not, Parks doubts that any ruler of the time would have openly acknowledged an adviser who had publicly declared his belief that, "trickery was largely the name of the game and that though it wasn't important to have a religious faith it was absolutely essential to *appear* to have one"! Machiavelli discusses the various forms of monarchies and republics, then moves on to the factors a leader should consider in his approach to ruling. (By the way, this book was written in the 1500s, it's always going to be "he, him, and his"!)

Without recreating here the entire book (!) a sample of the chapter titles is probably enough to get the general gist:

What men and particularly rulers are praised and blamed for

Generosity and meanness

Cruelty and compassion. Whether it is better to be feared or loved.

A ruler and his promises

Avoiding contempt and hatred

What a ruler should do to win respect

Avoiding flatterers

The role of luck in human affairs, and how to defend against it

I'm absolutely certain that each of these titles will bring to *iScot* readers' minds a variety of so-called leaders and their various exploits, failures, and excuses. For us in Scotland, unfortunately, many of them are somewhat too close to home. For example, Machiavelli advises that, "you must never fail to respond to trouble just to avoid war, because in the end you won't avoid it, you'll just be putting it off to your enemy's advantage". After the Brexit vote in 2016, the Scottish Government should have responded by declaring "a material change in circumstances" following the lies peddled, the false promises issued, and the purdah-breaking behaviour of the UK Government and the mainstream media during the 2014 referendum, and used the power of having 56 out of 59 MPs in Westminster to demand either a rerun of the 2014 referendum under UN

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rules and supervision or to issue an immediate revocation of the Treaty of Union based on the 2014 referendum being declared null and void.

Fanciful? Maybe, but what did our politicians do instead? Effectively the square root of hee-haw! And, just as Machiavelli predicted, the advantage slowly but surely passed to our opponents to the extent that Scotland now has only nine independence-supporting MPs out of 57. By the way, that 56 out of 59 result in 2015 was achieved by the SNP winning 50% of the vote – the Scottish Greens won 1.3%, which means that there was an absolute pro-independence majority! Allied to an overall majority in Holyrood, we were never in a stronger position to reclaim our nationhood!

The Prince can certainly be read and interpreted in different ways, both positively and negatively, yet the Machiavellian trope has come to represent the ability to "know how to disguise your slyness, how to pretend one thing and cover up another". Yet great philosophers have pointed to the counter-interpretation, where Machiavelli indicates the power that ordinary people have if only they would recognise their strengths and see through the subterfuge of those in power. At this point in our history, with the disintegration of the Tory party through their own greed and sense of entitlement, with the rise of the opportunistic populists and an increasingly emboldened far right, and with the abandonment of any remaining hint of social conscience from the Labour party, it is Scotland's shame that our citizens still voted in substantial numbers to enable these charlatans. Having said that, we have only around eighteen months to regroup before our next scheduled democratic event, the 2026 Holyrood elections. (I only say "scheduled" because who knows what actually lies ahead?)

It is an absolute imperative that the SNP gets a grip of itself and agrees to work in unison with other independence-supporting parties, individuals, and organisations. On the political side, only a "Scotland United" campaign makes any sense and has any chance of success, but it must come together immediately, not waiting until an overly long period of "reflection" or a stage-managed conference that avoids the critical issues. Alongside that the long-overdue, long-promised, Constitutional Convention must be initiated, again immediately, not in the autumn or after the election... but now! And the non-party political initiatives must also acknowledge each other and work cooperatively – no more marches or meetings in opposition to each other or proclaiming that "we" are the only true route to independence.

The Prince is not an easy read but is well worth the effort. (*Game of Thrones*... meh, not so much!) But please heed Niccolò Machiavelli's wise advice from 400 years ago:

the people are so many that power ultimately lies with them

There are no dragons coming to save us, and a political winter is definitely coming... let's not get fooled again!

(Next month, I'll have a go at Sun Tzu's 'The Art of War'... or maybe not!)

Scotland United shall never be defeated

SCOTLAND UNITED