

Gordon Craigie



An independent mind...

This month, we're thinking about Scotland's Lost Decade, and the SNP's Timid Tango with Independence...

AS WE SETTLE into the reality of the continuation of austerity, driven by the inexplicable belief in neo-liberal economics of the UK Chancellor Rachel Reeves and the aggressive Britishness of the Prime Minister Keir Starmer – whoever would've believed that the Labour Party would be led by a "Sir"? – where stands Scotland? As was the case a couple of months back, in *iScot* issue 96, this month's scribblings are a joint effort inspired by the regular discussions/debates/rants (!) that take place between your humble correspondent and his esteemed Editor – aye, that'll still be me and Ken!

To us, and I suspect many of you, it appears to be undeniable that the cause of Scottish independence should be far more advanced than it is today. Despite holding power in Holyrood for getting on for two decades, despite achieving 56 out of 59 MPs in Westminster in the aftermath of the 2014 Referendum, despite attaining the status of the third-largest Westminster party prior to the July Westminster election, all the while buoyed by unwavering public support, the SNP has made zero progress towards this fundamental goal. Consequently, as we stand in 2024 – after a shambolic Westminster election – the dream of re-establishing our independence feels as distant as ever. The question is, why?

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Over the last ten years, the "lost decade", the SNP has done little more than tread water, repeatedly offering postponements and broken promises instead of real progress. Any concerns were invariably shouted down by cries of, "well, who else is going to deliver independence if not the SNP?", a rhetorical barb that is wearing as well as Ian Blackford's oft-repeated cry that "Scotland will not be removed from the EU against its will!"

The missed opportunity of the promised second referendum exemplifies this failure. Once touted as a "no ifs, no buts" guarantee by former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, this second referendum was supposed to be **the** decisive step towards the restoration of Scotland's independence. Yet, it never materialised. Sturgeon unexpectedly resigned as FM, and the answer to the "who else is going to deliver independence?" question now seems highly unlikely to be the SNP, at least in its current form. Indeed, in a televised interview after the July election, Westminster SNP leader Stephen Flynn downplayed the referendum commitment as merely, "it was just Nicola's idea...", an astonishing admission that should prompt serious reflection within the party. How can something as crucial as a **guaranteed** second referendum hinge on the whim of one individual? This raises deeper concerns about the leadership and direction within the party that must urgently be addressed, but preferably not through the usual muttered clichés along the lines of "didn't get our message across", "hard work", "listen to the people", "root and branch reform", etc.

By the time you're reading this, the SNP's conference will have taken place and we'll know the outcome of their "reflections" on the General Election defeat. I, for one, am not optimistic, mainly because of the steady drip-feed of ca-canny messages being aired by some of those now-former MPs. Tommy Sheppard's columns in *The National*

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SNP



appear to suggest the adoption of a “rinse and repeat” strategy, involving many of the clichés referred to earlier. Indeed, as I write this, he’s now advocating a plan designed to lead to a referendum in the 2030s! I suppose he’s at least a bit more optimistic than the erstwhile Spokesperson for Defence Stewart McDonald as he seems to favour 2050 – at least, that’s what he encouraged Humza Yousaf, Kate Forbes, and Ash Regan to think about during the 2023 SNP leadership campaign. However, since losing his seat, he now also advocates retaining nuclear weapons in Scotland and constantly harps on about strengthening Scotland’s position within NATO! Talking of NATO, what happened to the SNP’s long-held position of neutrality in an independent Scotland? Oh, yes, that was pushed through under the watch of one Angus Robertson. I met him once, during the SNP Depute Leader hustings in 2016. After the candidate’s speeches – Robertson, Sheppard, Alyn Smith, and Chris McEleny – he shmoozed his way around the gathering before arriving at our small group. I found him to be arrogant, smug, smarmy, and completely false, and nothing he has done since, up to and including his latest disastrous and ill-judged (?) dalliance with the Israelis, has changed my opinion. He is most definitely, along with McDonald, on a list of current and former MSPs/MPs that I would not trust and do not believe are genuinely working towards restoring Scotland’s independence.

Another thing that really, really riles me about all of our elected pro-independence representatives is how meekly they seem to accept that polling of 50% and above isn’t enough to make political capital out of. “We need at least 60%” is probably the most commonly touted benchmark, though I’m sure I’ve heard some advocate 67%, the so-called “super majority”. Firstly, as we have repeatedly highlighted in this magazine, the polls that are published by the mainstream, unionist-owned, media are commissioned by and carried out by unionist-funded organisations, so the quoted pro-independence figures are always likely to be downplayed. Secondly, we never have had an answer as to why super-sleekit Michael Gove absolutely refused to release the Tories’ government-funded private polling on support for independence, despite being instructed by the courts to do so after Tommy Sheppard’s five-year legal battle – I think we know why! This attitude of, “well, there’s only half the population supports independence so there’s nothing we can do” completely ignores the counterargument of, “well, only half the population supports the status quo so we have to do something!” Why this acceptance?

Historically, independence movements have been driven by grassroots uprisings, not by political parties alone. The SNP seems to have forgotten this crucial lesson, mistakenly believing that independence can be delivered

from the top down, through political manoeuvring and carefully timed referendums. Independence is not a gift to be bestowed by politicians, it is a right to be seized by the people, preferably via the ballot box. This fundamental misunderstanding has been the SNP’s greatest failing. Instead of empowering a grassroots movement they have relied on a centralised, controlled, political process, waiting for the “perfect” moment that never arrives – or does arrive and is not recognised or, indeed, seized upon! This approach has shamefully squandered the energy and passion of independence supporters who now find themselves frustrated and disillusioned. The party’s self-inflicted disconnection from its base is not just a failure of leadership but a betrayal of the trust and passion invested in the cause.

England’s vote to leave the European Union in 2016 presented the ideal opportunity for Scotland to push for independence. Remember that Scotland’s decisive 62% remain vote was ignored due to England’s 53% vote to leave is yet another example of how Scotland’s voice can *never* be heard in a Union dominated by a country ten times bigger with ten times the number of parliamentarians. However, rather than push the argument that a manifest change of circumstances demanded that the independence referendum – narrowly lost only two years previously, with one of the principal arguments of Project Fear being “Vote No to remain in the EU”! – needed revisiting, the SNP seemed bizarrely content to wait and see how Brexit would unfold rather than seizing the moment. Despite loudly protesting about Scotland being dragged out of the EU against its will, the party failed to take any decisive action when it mattered most. Like us, there must be many independistas who have questioned the level of British State interference in Sturgeon’s fiefdom...

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The COVID-19 pandemic was another crisis that could have galvanised the independence movement but instead became yet another excuse for inaction. While the Scottish Government's response to the pandemic was often more competent than Westminster's, the SNP failed to use this contrast to advance the case for independence. Initially, it might have been reasonable to argue that a pandemic was not the time for constitutional debates but as months turned into years this rationale became increasingly unconvincing. We wonder if, at any time, there were internal discussions held that recognised the need to keep the independence supporters motivated through this prolonged period of inactivity? And yet, throughout these Brexit/Covid years of SNP hesitation and inaction, Westminster never once paused its campaign to promote the Union via the tsunami of Better Together rhetoric delivered unquestioningly by the State broadcaster (BBC), Sassenach TV (STV), and the foreign-owned dead tree press. The UK Government has consistently and relentlessly reinforced the idea of *our* United Kingdom, deploying resources, propaganda, and influence, to maintain the status quo. The contrast between the British Establishment's determination to defend the status quo and the SNP's hesitancy and inaction could not be starker.

One telling sign of the SNP's current malaise was the party's recent campaign material, distributed across Scotland, which astonishingly made no mention of independence at all – this despite the pre-election promise that independence would “proudly sit on page one, line one” of the manifesto! When the party is supposedly fighting for Scotland's future as an independent nation, the absence of this cornerstone issue – indeed, the party's *raison d'être*! – is baffling. And John Swinney's tone-deaf explanation for the SNP's poor performance in the Westminster elections only adds to these concerns. His assertion that, “the voters didn't like our vision of independence” rings hollow considering that independence was scarcely mentioned. If the SNP is unwilling to champion its most fundamental cause, how can it expect the electorate to support it?

So, what has the SNP been waiting for? The next crisis? The next excuse? It is high time they stopped tiptoeing around the issue and started showing some courage. The mandate for independence has been there, waiting to be seized, but the

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SNP has consistently failed to act. They have been timid when boldness was required, hesitant when the moment called for decisiveness. The 2026 Holyrood elections now loom large, and they may well serve as a referendum on the SNP itself. Electoral mandates are not eternal, they are granted with the expectation of action not inaction. The Scottish people entrusted the SNP with the power to pursue independence, but that trust is wearing thin. If the SNP cannot deliver on its promises then it risks being consigned to the annals of history, remembered not as the party that delivered independence but as the one that actively squandered it.

The time has come for the SNP to face the uncomfortable truth – if they are to have any purpose, any relevance, they must make the 2026 Scottish elections a de-facto referendum on Scottish independence. Nothing less will suffice. They need to shed the layers of cautious pragmatism that have smothered their revolutionary spirit and commit, unequivocally, to campaigning for independence as their singular priority. They must also do so under a “United Scotland” banner, gathering all pro-independence forces in the pursuit of one cause, with one vision, and one unassailable goal.

Consider the alternative. If they refuse this path, if they continue to vacillate and offer excuses rather than bold leadership, what remains of their purpose? They risk becoming little more than a Vichy interface for the UK State – a convenient mechanism to placate the Scottish electorate while ensuring the status quo remains unchallenged. This is not the destiny that was envisioned by those who once looked to the SNP as the vanguard of a new Scotland. This is not what the people voted for, time and time again, entrusting the SNP with their dreams of independence.

But time is running out. The patience of the Scottish people, already worn thin, may soon snap. The SNP must act decisively and make the 2026 elections a clear, unmistakable mandate for independence. They must rally the troops, inspire the disillusioned, and remind everyone why the SNP exists in the first place. If they fail to do so, they will have answered the question of their purpose themselves – not as the deliverers of a free Scotland, but as the custodians of a much-diminished, subservient, region of Greater England. History, as we all know, is rarely kind to those who choose the latter. It's time to end this timid tango with independence – Saor Alba!

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Alba Aonaichte (Scottish Gaelic)
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SCOTLAND UNITED

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