

Scottish Voice

Alan Smart interviews Archie Stirling about his newly launched political party and wonders if who dares wins?



IN the shadow of the Wallace Monument, I arrived at the Riverside restaurant in Stirling to interview an unlikely Braveheart. I first met Archie Stirling, the laird of Keir, “millionaire playboy”, and nephew of SAS founder David Stirling, at Edinburgh’s Balmoral Hotel, when he launched his Scottish Voice Party, five days earlier. There he had treated the media pack to a taste of the lifestyle he had long taken for granted: they guzzled down his champagne, canapés and quails eggs, and then duly lambasted the laird for his miscalculated generosity.

In the intervening days, I had watched as the Scottish press, predictably, had laid into the “toff”, who’s new party he had declared, unashamedly, had “no policies” and “no candidates” – well none that he could yet name, anyway. This was followed by a weekend assassination by the London-based *Sunday Times* scribe Giles Hattersley, who had flown up for the day to establish, definitively that the leader of Scottish Voice enjoyed a more affluent lifestyle than the people living in the Sighthill high flats he had briefly glimpsed as he sped from Edinburgh airport to rural Stirlingshire. There he enjoyed a day at the extensive home and estate of the laird and his third wife, American environmentalist Sharon Silver. Hattersley’s conclusion – “Poor Archie, charming chap, lousy politician.”

And charming he most certainly was, as we walked around the Riverside’s grounds prior to interview. Here I got an insight into the charisma of a man who had wed second wife Diana Rigg when she was top actress and top totty, and then left her for the then 24-year-old Joely Richardson, 30 years his junior. But now, aged a sprightly 65, Archie is trying to seduce an altogether more coy maiden – the Scottish electorate – as he prepares to lead a team of upwards of 40 candidates at this May’s Holyrood elections.

But why, I asked, given his landed and privileged background, was he not simply preparing to attend the Scottish Conserva-

tive's pre-election conference in Perth this coming weekend?

"Scottish landowners have not automatically belonged to the Tory party in the past," he reminded me. "I am capable of voting for any party that I think will serve the country. I've voted Labour, I've voted various things. Yes, I have given money to the Tories in the past, but I've given money to save the whale. The idea that I am a Tory without a home, is simply wrong

"Mrs Thatcher started well, but the Tory party treated Scotland disgracefully because they didn't understand what was happening, the impact of the collapse of heavy industry. I fully understand the antipathy people in Scotland have towards the Tory party."

A no voter in the 1999 referendum, I asked Archie why he supported devolution now. "I was wrong. I am now absolutely certain devolution was the right thing to do, as it makes people in Scotland feel more associated with what goes on," adding, "Westminster did not serve us well, even when Scots were running things."

But why get involved, why now does he want to be part of a project that ten years ago he wanted killed at birth? "Then I did not see things in exclusively Scottish terms, which devolution has led to. But with the greatest respect to some thoroughly decent people, what happened was the first level of politicians did not rush back to Scotland. A lot of those who were elected were simply part of the political machine of the party they represented."

Referring to the independent tradition in Scottish local government, he added, "there was a hope that going into Holyrood was something people might be able to do, that we might get a better cross-section of people taking part. We didn't. What we got was a miniature version of Westminster and not a particularly efficient version of it, which is slightly pointless".

But can his infant Scottish Voice make any impact? What are his realistic electoral targets in May? "To have as many candidates as possible, how many votes? I don't know. But we are determined to start a debate on how do we make Holyrood work for the people of Scotland. And it's not working in the three main areas where it has real power – education, criminal justice, and health. Have the last eight years led to any improvement in these areas? The answer is surely no."

I asked him though, about the already crowded electoral field and specifically,



The laird of Keir Archie Stirling

about the demise of the Scottish People's Alliance which set out with a similar perspective in Holyrood's 2003 elections and sank without trace. "It's called democracy, different ideas and choices are surely good for the electorate. I believe that over the next 10 weeks, what we stand for, believe in, will strike a chord – enough to get some people in there, several if not more. Money-wise, there is no bottomless pit, but several people have already committed funds. We have enough to fight a campaign, and as we appeal to people, we hope to get more. We would not have set off down this road if we did not have enough."

One area where Scottish Voice got a particular media mauling at its Balmoral Hotel launch was its lack of specific policies. I asked him if this omission was not a mistake. "We have not set out a series of answers to every single problem that exists because any new party that does this is not being realistic. We start with one premise – Holyrood [is] not working. As the election approaches, we will announce our goals – policies are a means to achieving goals. The goals we will focus upon will be improving Scotland's education, criminal justice and health – and in cutting back bureaucracy. Scotland is drowning in a mass of red tape. But we are not setting out to be just another political party – we want to be the political party which actually speaks sense about what is happening in Scotland."

One thing that is definitely happening is that the debate on independence is warming up. Given pre-launch headlines about his new party claimed it was being set up to "save the Union", presumably

Jack McConnell could rely upon Archie on this issue if he got himself into Holyrood? 'New party founded to make devolution work,' would have been the correct headline, he told me. But was he fundamentally a unionist or a nationalist? "The only thing that matters to me is what is best for Scotland. The Union has served us well, but things change. I don't know what things will be like in 10 years time. But I believe there will always be some reason for us to link with our neighbour, no matter how independent. Degrees of independence, yes, but Scottish armies and embassies don't make sense to me. Let's be logical about it."

But would you ever vote for independence? "Not with the present lot running the country," he replied intriguingly.

And what about a referendum on independence? "To have a referendum in 100 days would be stupid." But within 4 years? "If there was clearly a body of opinion that felt a referendum on independence would put the matter to bed for 10 years, then, of course, we should have it, and a proper debate with it."

So there we have it. The supposed "save the Union" party, is led by a man who is open minded on the issue, so open minded that he would give the people of Scotland a vote on the matter within four years. Pity the Scottish media pack was too busy eating quails eggs to ask.

This brought us back to the media mauling Archie had received at his hands over the past five days. "I know it's rough, accept it's rough, but I do believe in what I'm doing. I don't even mind when it's vicious, as long as it's entertaining. But give me the next 6-8 weeks to let me explain what Scottish Voice is about and then judge us."

I will. But is a Stirlingshire laird the man to deliver the message? I never asked that question, forgot to, ran out of time. A hero of mine has always been Robert Bontine Cunningham Graham, a laird of a Perthshire estate not too far from Archie's. He, along with Keir Hardie, was the co-founder of the Scottish Labour Party in 1888, and remarkably, also a co-founder of the SNP, almost 40 years later – its first honorary president, in fact. A toff in anybody's book. But a good guy, who made a difference.

And as my train pulled out of Stirling on the way back to Edinburgh, I caught a final glimpse of the Wallace Monument and was reminded Braveheart himself was an aristocrat. And who dares, sometimes wins. ■

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