

# Holyrood Election 2007

## A nice line in croissants and rhetoric from a fatherly voice

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Sketch



To breakfast with Archie Stirling, leader of Scottish Voice, the classiest new party on the election circuit, only to find that the quails eggs and champagne we had been led to expect were not on offer; another pledge broken — is there no end to it? Mr Stirling apologised handsomely. “If it wasn’t for me, there’d be no chairs for you lot either,” he said, which was small comfort.

We were sustained, however, by a decent line in croissants, and some of the better rhetoric to have emerged from the campaign so far.

“Election time is when the politicians hope you don’t remember the promises they made last time,” proclaimed Mr Stirling, whose suave appearance and chiselled good looks had led to some early swooning among the female reporters.

Pointing out that his party offered “goals and objectives” rather than policies, he told us: “Policies are inflexible objectives which hang like albatrosses around the necks of politicians.”

Thus unencumbered, he outlined his own vision of a Scotland free of top-heavy bureaucracy, whip-driven parties, politicians “who have more in common with each other than the electorate” and the “hugely expensive and bloated local government system” that is holding the country back.

He takes a dim view of Holyrood, a place of “upside down boats” that has failed the nation, and compares it unfavourably to Westminster, which, he says, has more gravitas. Not that he has a particularly high view of

power in schools and hospitals to real experts; people who know what they are doing and don’t need politicians interfering and telling them what to do.

All of this could be achieved if Scotland had a “bottom-up and not a top-down” approach to solving problems, and if those at the bottom were “the right people to find the right answers”. Quite where they were to come from and who would choose them was never quite explained, but we all agreed it sounded an excellent idea.

I sensed, however, a wistful streak to Mr Stirling’s appeal to the voters to “get Scotland back on track”. His vision for the nation owes perhaps more to the 18th century and the days of gentleman politicians than to the unforgiving party-driven politics of the 21st century, and he has, by his own admission, found it difficult to drum up enthusiasm for a new party whose appeal is more mistily idealistic than is common in the harsh world of modern politics.

But he has done more than grumble from the side lines, and he deserves congratulations for that. How much, wondered a questioner, had the campaign cost him? “Well, this lot cost about a hundred pounds,” he said. “It would have been a hell of a sight more if we’d come up with the quails eggs and the champagne.”

Looking round at his audience, which contained a healthy proportion of women, he bade us farewell with a proper absence of political correctness: “Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming.”

