**Where is the mature discussion?**

**Neil Findlay**

**In April 2019 I sat in my seat in the Scottish Parliament and listened to Nicola Sturgeon set out her plan for another referendum. In doing so she said:**

*‘I have therefore asked Mike Russell to explore with other parties, perhaps with the help of a respected and independent individual who can broker such discussions, areas of agreement on constitutional and procedural change...’*

**- this never happened.**

The First Minister went onto to say,

*‘This exercise should not start with our taking any fixed position—if parties can find it in themselves not to do that—but should openly consider the challenges that Scotland faces and the solutions that might help us address them. If serious and substantial proposals emerge, this Parliament could present them to the UK Government in a unified and united way. If other parties are willing, I give an assurance today that the Scottish Government will engage fully and in good faith.’*

 - **this never happened.**

And she finished with,

 *‘I will also seek to open up space for us to come together and find areas of agreement, as mature politicians should do. In so doing, I will try to set an example of constructive, outward-looking and respectful debate. In recent times, we have seen in Westminster what happens when parties fail to work together, when leaders take a “My way or the highway” approach and when so many red lines and inflexible preconditions are set that progress becomes impossible. Tensions rise and tempers fray.’*

- **you can make your own mind up on whether Ms Sturgeon set an example of ‘constructive, outward looking and respectful debate’.**

And therein lies the problem with Nicola Sturgeon and her unionist opponents.  They share a ‘My way or the highway’ approach, a 51% - 49% strategy based on creating enough division to get their position over the line, not on building unity. Theirs is an arrogant, tin-eared approach that dismisses those who want to see radical constitutional change but reject the neo liberal economic prospectus put forward by the SNP and the self evidently failing status quo of the Tories.

Where is the attempt to understand and build bridges with those of us who believe in the right of Scots to determine our own future but reject the SNP’s currency debacle, a hard border with England and the deficit reduction plan that would decimate public services and cause further social and economic division? Or with those who reject a centralised, increasingly corrupt, racist and elitist British state that is failing working class communities? How could socialists possibly support a plan that would see UK wide redistribution end only to be replaced by more crippling Tory style austerity dressed in the kilt.

 What happened to promised cross party talks and the ‘mature discussion’? All of those commitments appear to have been PR fluff spouted to get through a parliamentary debate and were soon replaced by the old, tedious, well rehearsed political attacks and divisive rhetoric roared into a megaphone to keep on board the restless base who have been strung along since 2014.

But of course charges of being ‘tin eared’ and ‘arrogant’ cannot only be levelled at the leadership of the SNP and Tories, the Labour hierarchy has been practicing masochistic constitutional delusion for almost 15 years.

The failure to take a distinct and radical devo max or home rule position in 2014, instead lining up with the Tories in the catastrophic ‘Better Together’ campaign was the greatest tactical disaster in the history of the Scottish Labour Party. The subsequent electoral annihilation testifies to that. Any rational person would expect the party to have learnt lessons from that debacle, alas not. The current Scottish and UK Labour leaders appear determined to stand with their fingers in their ears shouting la, la, la every time the constitution is mentioned. By doing so they right off 50% of the electorate at a stroke.

 In my time in parliament I sat through presentation after presentation from pollsters showing that those most likely to return to Labour are working class voters who voted Yes in 2014. Under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership there was an attempt to shift the debate and the party’s position towards a more progressive position of further devolution. But this was rejected and attacked by those who now occupy senior positions in the Scottish Labour Party and the Scottish Parliament.

The recently published report from Gordon Brown’s *Our Scottish Future* think tank focussed on reform of the UK state. And whilst there was some good and necessary stuff in it, there was a complete absence of radical proposals in relation to the devolution of further powers to the Scottish Parliament. A massive missed opportunity.

If Nicola Sturgeon, Keir Starmer and Anas Sarwar genuinely wanted to show leadership they would do well to follow the example of Mark Drakeford, the First Minister of Wales. He has brought politicians of all persuasions together to discuss the future of Wales, the independence option is part of their discussions. The remit of the Independent Commission on the constitutional future of Wales is to ***‘consider and develop options for fundamental reform of the constitutional structures of the United Kingdom, in which Wales remains an integral part. The second is to consider and develop all progressive principal options to strengthen Welsh democracy and deliver improvements for the people of Wales’.***

 Political parties in Wales are willingly engaging in a mature debate without hyperbole, threats and the ridicule of those with whom they disagree. The contrast with Scotland could not be more stark.

I do however live in hope. Hope that one day someone in the SNP will wake up to the fact that attempting to create a new state based on a polarised, divided community is not a particularly good idea. Hope that the Scottish Labour Party will wake up from its decade long delusion. Hope that political leaders and their advisers will learn from what happened in the 1990’s when parties, faith groups, trade unions and civil society came together to build a broad coalition for constitutional change that delivered a 74% vote in favour of creating a Scottish Parliament and 63% in support of it having tax raising powers. Hope that rhetoric, ego, arrogance and the intransigence of our political leaders can be put aside in the national interest.

But then again I hope to one day be 12 stone again!

*An abridged version of this article first appeared in Holyrood Magazine*

*Neil Findlay was an MSP between 2011 and 2021, he is a Director of Unity Consulting, a not for profit social enterprise*