

REVIEW: BIOGRAPHY OF TAM DALYELL

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Russell Galbraith, **A Biography of Tam Dalyell: Inside Outside, The Man They Can't Gag**, Mainstream, 2000, ISBN 1840183675, £15.95.

Having spent part of my childhood in the town of Penicuik, Rullion Green, on the lower slopes of the Pentland Hills, was a popular spot for family walks and picnics. It was on such outings that I first learned that this favoured picnicking spot had been a battlefield on which an army of Covenanters had been badly defeated, with many of the survivors being hanged or transported. It was only later that I came to appreciate that the royalist general who treated the Covenanters so sorely in 1666, Bloody Tam Dalyell, was a direct ancestor of Tam Dalyell, the Labour MP for Linlithgow.

This, and other aspects of a fascinating family history, are included in the new biography of the latter-day Tam by Russell Galbraith. It is almost 40 years since Tam Dalyell first entered parliament, and he seems set to serve for a further four or five years. During that time he has become one of the most colourful characters in the House of Commons, a factor that comes through time and again in Galbraith's book.

I am sure I am not alone in wondering how Tom Loch, scion of the minor aristocracy, Old Etonian, former President of Cambridge University Conservative Association and National Serviceman with the family regiment, the Royal Scots Greys, founded by Bloody Tam, managed to become Labour MP Tam Dalyell by the age of 30. A most detailed account is provided in the book. The fact that it is at complete variance with accounts I have heard from senior West Lothian Labour people over the years makes it all the more interesting.

For me, the most interesting sections of the book are those dealing with Dalyell's battle against Scottish devolution. There is much in those particular chapters that I could take issue with, but I will restrict myself to what Tam, speaking through Galbraith, has to say about the introduction of the 40% rule. He maintains that he regarded the introduction of the hurdle as distasteful and 'not the British way'. His claim that the running was made by Robin Cook, deploying Anglo-Scot George Cunningham as a decoy, has generated some

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comment in press previews of the book. If naming the guilty men is the name of the game, then let's have it all out in the open. Five Scottish Labour MPs voted for the imposition of the 40% rule, Cook and Dalyell along with Peter Doig, Willie Hamilton and Bob Hughes. Cook seems to have been uncomfortable with his handiwork as he later attempted to reduce the threshold from 40% to 33.3%. On 1 March 1979, 33% of the total registered electorate voted Yes. If Cook's amendment had succeeded, it is interesting to speculate how the government would have reacted.

On the subject of Robin Cook, I can recall at least three occasions in the 1980s when he publicly admitted to having been wrong on home rule, and committing himself to do whatever he could to rectify the situation. From the Miscellaneous Provisions Act to the Poll Tax, the failure to establish a Scottish Assembly in 1979 exposed Scotland to many aspects of Thatcherism that would otherwise have been obstructed by a devolution settlement. To my knowledge we have yet to hear an apology from Tam.

While I have disagreed with Tam profoundly in the past, I recognise that his many and varied stances have been based on his own assessment of situations and issues, and never on personal advancement. In government, as much as in opposition, we rely on effective backbenchers to hold the Executive to account, and prevent representative democracy from descending into elected dictatorship. As long as Tam Dalyell continues to grace the House of Commons, we need have no fears on that account.

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