

## **REVIEW: THE ROAD FROM DALINTOBER, A TALE OF THREE SPEECHES**

*Robert McLean*

Brian Brivati (editor), **Guiding Light: The Collected Speeches of John Smith**, Politico's Publishing, London, 2000, ISBN 1902301625, 298 pages, £18.99.

The questioning of the longevity and consistency of John Smith's support for a Scottish parliament dominated much of the media comment on the recently published Tam Dalyell biography, which was reviewed in issue no. 34 of **Scottish Affairs**. The suggestion that John Smith was not a lifelong crusader for Scottish home rule should not have come as a shock.

The Labour Party that the young John Smith joined in the late 1950s was resolutely unionist, and Smith's individual conversion to the devolutionary path was a reflection of the wider debate within the party. One of the main obstacles blocking Labour's route back to home rule was the dominating figure of Willie Ross, the undoubted master of Labour in Scotland throughout the 1960s and 70s. Ross believed that the post-war unionist settlement guaranteed Scotland an influence greater than that warranted by the size of her population, and that devolution would result in a reduction in the number of Scottish MPs at Westminster and the undermining of the position of the Secretary of State for Scotland. While Ross' view influenced the party generally, it was accepted absolutely by his Parliamentary Private Secretary, John Smith, who echoed his boss's concerns in his contribution to Labour's special Dalintober Street conference in August 1974, 'Devolution maybe, but at any price?'. Smith welcomed the Kilbrandon Commission report. After years of generalised talk about vague notions of home rule, it was time for

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people in Scotland, including the Tories and the SNP, to define exactly what they wanted and to face up to the costs attached to each option, and to doing nothing. Kilbrandon had recommended that the establishment of a domestic Scottish legislature should be accompanied by a reduction in the Scottish ranks at Westminster and the abolition of the post of Secretary of State for Scotland. From the vantage point of the summer of 1974, Smith viewed it as too high a price.

While Smith's Dalintober speech remains under-reported, the subsequent development of John Smith's thinking on constitutional change, along with his commitment to Europe, multilateralism and a social democratic concept of social justice, is traced by three speeches included in **Guiding Light**, a collection of his speeches which includes a forward by the late Donald Dewar.

Labour emerged from Dalintober Street committed to an elected assembly, and fought and won the October 1974 general election on that programme. In April 1976, John Smith was promoted to Minister of State in the Privy Council Office. Just as he had loyally argued his former boss's corner, Smith now took upon his own shoulders the full weight of ministerial responsibility for the government's attempts to legislate for assemblies for Wales and Scotland, a legislative marathon which proved even tougher than the Government of India Act, the hitherto record holder for the most time-consuming piece of Westminster legislation. As the pilot of the legislation, Smith had to square up to detractors who harked back to his apparent lack of enthusiasm for the measure. He did so in a comprehensive speech in the Commons on 31 January 1978 in which he set out the thinking behind his own change of heart, and attempted to answer the West Lothian Question. Smith succeeded in taming the legislative leviathan, only to lose the ultimate prize to the 40% hurdle and Thatcher's election victory in May 1979. While Smith's conversion was initially driven by political necessity and the responsibilities of office, there is little doubt that the mastering of his complex brief convinced him of the democratic possibilities of constitutional change, a perspective underlined by the long years of Tory rule.

The priority assigned to constitutional change in Labour's programme by the 1990s is demonstrated in another Smith speech, to a party audience in Glasgow's Fountain Hotel on 10 January 1992. In this early salvo in the drawn out countdown to the 1992 general election, Smith, now Shadow Chancellor, reiterated party leader Kinnock's commitment to legislating for a Scottish parliament during Labour's first year in office.

*Review: The Collected Speeches of John Smith*

The slough of despondency in Scottish Labour ranks, following the April 1992 general election defeat, was rendered less deep by Smith's election as party leader in July of that year. Delivering the inaugural Dick Stewart Memorial Lecture at the University of Strathclyde on 23 October 1992, Smith coined the phrase that would become Scottish Labour's battle cry through the remainder of the 90s. A Scottish parliament was Smith's and Labour's 'unfinished business'. Undoubtedly, there would have been many more memorable phrases from the champion debater if only his 'Guiding Light' had not been extinguished so prematurely in May 1994.

The editor, Labour Party biographer Brian Brivati of Kingston University, invites the question: how would a Smith government have differed from Tony Blair's administration? This collection of speeches provides readers with a selective source of what Smith said, and did not say, with which to play the game of counterfactual history.

All royalties from sales of *Guiding Light* are donated to the John Smith Memorial Fund.

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