

REVIEW: THE HISTORY OF THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY

Kenny Farquharson

Peter Lynch, **SNP: The History of the Scottish National Party**, Cardiff
Welsh Academic Press (Ashley Drake
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Party histories understandably tend to dwell on time spent in government. After all, power is what politics is all about. This poses an obvious problem for a history of the SNP, as the pinnacle of the party's executive power has been a brief and ignominious stint running Tayside regional council. So Peter Lynch's new history of the SNP seldom feels like a story of affairs of state of the Scottish nation. More often it has the feel of a chronicle of a untidily run firm of country solicitors, or an institute of hobbyists, riven with schisms and full of people who can quote the articles of association.

There are two ways of understanding a political party. One is to regard it as something with a life of its own, an almost organic entity with its own personality and ways of operating. The other is to see it as a movement moulded and whittled by the personalities and minds of strong individuals who were determined to shape their world and make their mark. Both approaches have merit, and the perfect history of a political party would describe both. Unfortunately, Lynch's history has more of the former than the latter. It often seems like a history of an organisation rather than a movement. This is a shame when writing about a party where personal animosities and strong character traits have had such a bearing on its fortunes down the years, and to this day.

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Scottish Affairs

Seldom in this volume do strong characters like John MacCormick, Donald Stewart, Jim Sillars and Alex Salmond come alive for us on the page. We know what motions they proposed to the party's national council and which offices they held. We are told the impact they had on policy and the twists of strategy. But we do not get a feeling for what their personal idiosyncrasies and motivations were, how their minds worked, what they sounded like, how they rubbed along together, or didn't, and how it must have felt to be part of the events they experienced and brought about.

Often in contemporary histories, the picture becomes more vivid and compelling as it moves towards the present day, as the author's own personal observations are deployed and the memory of witnesses is sharper and fresher. In this book the opposite is the case. Steeped in nationalist lore, Lynch's strength lies in the SNP's dusty past, chronicling its fractiousness and its striving for legitimacy and competence amid many a Magnus Merriman-style mishap. Even as late as the saga of the 79 group in the early 1980s, Lynch's knowledge and attention to detail is most impressive, setting out events with great authority.

It is when we get to the 1990s that the book fails to deliver. It becomes more broad-brush, accepting much of what the party leaders said and did on their own terms, and too often – as with Salmond's 'unpardonable folly' comment and the 'penny for Scotland' debacle during the 1999 campaign – giving the hierarchy the benefit of the doubt.

But it is perhaps unfair to judge this book by the standards of the book it could have been. There is much to admire here. There is scholarship on every page. It will become the definitive reference work on the nationalist strand of Scottish politics and Scottish history. With access to the private papers of luminaries like Robert MacIntyre and Arthur Donaldson, the early days in particular are extremely well done, with close attention to original sources.

But perhaps the most interesting part of the book is the final chapter, in which Lynch does some crystal ball gazing about the party's prospects and the possible paths towards independence. By close reference to the Scotland Act, he shows how difficult it would be for an SNP-led administration to hold its promised referendum on independence, given the checks and balances deliberately built in to counter just such an ultra vires action. And he shows how slow and thankless the task would be of the gradualist approach which, Lynch informs us, is sometimes called the 'accelerationist'

Review: The History of the Scottish National Party

approach by some adherents. This is all very impressive and has never been set out so well before.

But it is incomplete. Lynch does not explore other areas of possibility that are even more of an affront to party orthodoxy. He rightly points out that the gradualist/acclerationist road could be a long one, and that a fundamentalist backlash is likely along the way. What he fails to countenance is the possibility of a split in the party, with either the fundies or the gradualists breaking off to form a party of their own. The electoral system at Holyrood makes it eminently possible for a small nationalist party to have a fair representation of MSPs and to become a player in power-broking in the event of a close-run election. Sillars's SLP showed it could be done in the pre-PR 1970s and, in the last couple of years in Quebec, Mario Dumont's ADQ showed spectacularly how a splinter group could come from nowhere and severely damage a complacent nationalist party.

Similarly, Lynch does not explore the most obvious and most controversial option for an SNP stuck in opposition. That option is the watering-down of the party's non-negotiable promise to hold an independence referendum once in power. Such a compromise could make sense for a number of reasons. For example, there may well be occasions when it is not in an SNP government's interest to hold a referendum. If support for independence is seen to be soft, then a referendum might result in a defeat that would be a major setback to both the cause and the party.

More importantly, watering down the commitment to a referendum would address a more immediate difficulty that Lynch leaves unexplored – how the SNP would persuade a potential coalition partner like the Lib Dems to join it in a nationalist-led administration? It is hard to see the Lib Dems signing up to any partnership deal that involved holding a referendum on independence, and the chances of a nationalist SNP/Green/SSP axis outnumbering a unionist Labour/Tory/Lib Dem alliance look remote.

By failing to explore this route, Lynch leaves unanswered one of the most telling questions about SNP strategy – what happens if the SNP is the largest party in the parliament but cannot find a partner willing to join it in a coalition? Would the SNP simply shrug and pass up the opportunity for power, leaving a party with fewer seats to try to form an administration? Would it simply refuse to play and go off in the huff? Or would it recognise reality, put the referendum policy on ice, and get on with governing?

Scottish Affairs

The question goes to the heart of what the SNP is for. Is it simply a vehicle for the independence campaign, with everything else subsumed to that cause? Or is it an alternative government for a devolved Scotland, committed to improving the lot of ordinary Scots within whatever constitutional framework it finds itself? If the SNP gave up the chance to put into action its policies on education, health and justice, just because the Lib Dems wouldn't play ball on a referendum, voters would be justified in being rather annoyed. Why should they vote SNP again? The current strategy assumes that uppermost in the concerns of every SNP voter is the desire for independence, and that everything else is secondary. This is plainly not the case. Polls consistently show that a significant proportion of SNP voters do not support independence at all, a phenomenon Lynch (and the SNP leadership) ignores.

It is a shame Lynch does not feel able to explore these scenarios. He has the knowledge and insight to provide an authoritative judgement on how they might work out. He seems unwilling to do that here. Too often the book reads like an in-house history. It is plain that his interviewees were less than forthcoming about the behind-the-scenes happenings of more recent events and that Lynch did not pry too far on his own. There are no obvious revelations. The relentlessly up beat tone about the party's prospects at the 2003 election was, frankly, not shared by many of the party's senior figures, and was not borne out by events.