

JOHN SMITH AN APPRECIATION

Neil MacCormick

Most tributes to John Smith have recalled his Mid-Argyll background. And rightly so. The values of Ardrishaig schoolhouse and of the Tarbert fishing were etched deep into him. He had tales to tell about his fisherman grandfather 'Hairy' Smith, from whom he inherited a youthful nickname that got dropped in University days. It was as well dropped, since he was always clean-shaven, and getting a bit thin on top from quite an early age. He had a deep admiration for his father, Archie Smith, and his mother Sarah Cameron Smith. The values they stood for were his, too, but thought out for himself, not just swallowed whole.

He worked in his student days in constructing the reservoir and waterworks at Loch Glashan above Lochgilphead. He had at least one summer holiday job on a puffer. His view of the world and his way of being just the same John with all kinds and classes of people were laid down early, and never changed in essentials, though he learned much on his way through his studies, his legal practice, his time in Parliament. But he combined in a curious way a genuine egalitarianism with a clear sense of his own vocation to the exercise of high office. He combined an awareness of himself as someone special with a competing sense of the specialness of every human being as a unique repository of worth and dignity. Being a son of a schoolhouse seems to have had on him an effect often noted among sons of the manse.

He included me among his friends from student days on. We had quite a lot in common, though I was younger, and though we had a kind of hereditary political difference that went back to the days when Archie Smith and my father John MacCormick were themselves students together, and my father

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left the Labour Club to help found the Scottish National Party. It often surprised me that he could remain so affable towards a member of a party often in bitter rivalry with his own, though I suppose that I have always steered well clear of any kind of bitterness or excessive vehemence myself. Anyway, while very scornful of wavering loyalty in his own party, he always had friends in other parties, regarding loyalty as a virtue, even loyalty to what he took to be inveterate error. He came and spoke for me in 1964 in a Presidential debate at the Oxford Union, the tradition being that each candidate nominated a distinguished person as their fellow speaker on the order paper. John was only twenty five then, but he had stood twice for Parliament and I had no doubt of his distinction. The highly critical Oxford Union Society audience did so, too, when he had finished speaking, though few had heard of him before he got to his feet. We were debating about criminal justice and criminal punishment, and I think the line he took prefigured the now popular idea of his probable successor - 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'.

For a while, I was working in Oxford, but we kept in touch, and I remember dropping him a line of congratulation when he was adopted as candidate for Coatbridge and Airdrie at a time when Labour was trailing the SNP in the polls of 1968. He was gleeful to record how many people still wanted to hang on to the (alleged, as he said) 'maggotty corpse' of the Labour Party. And of course, when it came to the General Election of 1970, he got in, and stayed there till his death. Two years later, I was appointed to Edinburgh University, and we moved to a house that happened to be a block away from the Smiths. We were two three-daughter families, and our daughters overlapped and criss-crossed in various play groups, primary schools and eventually secondary schools, to say nothing of near-misses at Glasgow University a good deal later on. He was still a lot in practice at the Scots Bar as an opposition backbencher. There was a good deal of socialising, and especially at the New Year an assortment of the old Glasgow University Union crowd would get together at one or another or all of a series of parties around Morningside.

Elizabeth Bennett and he made a great team. Jimmy Gordon at the funeral in Cluny Church called John and Elizabeth's marriage one 'made in heaven', and that hit the nail on the head. One of my memories is in response to the 'What were you doing when John Kennedy was assassinated?' question. I was travelling as an impecunious student on the late night flight from Heathrow to Glasgow on a standby ticket that cost (even in 1963) two guineas, and I had the good luck to land in the seat next to Liz, who was then briefly working in London but on her way home for a long weekend associated with the

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junketings around the Glasgow Union's mammoth intervarsities debate. I was headed that way myself. John was of course awaiting the flight at Glasgow, and I cadged a lift to the West end. Despite the haunting sadness of that day, they were in grand form, and it seemed obvious that theirs was a friendship (I don't think they were yet engaged) that was destined to be durable.

He was himself for a long time highly sceptical about Scottish home rule, and I remember discussions with him out in a boat of his in the early seventies, as he reconsidered the question. Like many social democrats faithful to some version of the ideal of international socialism and brotherhood, he was impatient of diversions from what he saw as the prime objective of pursuing social justice on as broad a front as possible. Social justice was to be secured only through the election of a Labour government. Paying people their pay 'in a tartan pay packet' would enhance neither income nor job security, as he once trenchantly put it in a Union debate. He saw no contradiction between his full-hearted commitment to a consciously British (and largely fabian) political tradition while at the same time profoundly attached to the mixed Gaelic-Scots heritage of Mid-Argyll and Kintrye where he and his people had their roots. He very much wanted his daughters to be brought up in Scotland, attending the ordinary schools, and speaking with Scots accents. Yet although it was in Edinburgh that he wanted to live, it was in London that he wanted to exercise power. This wasn't in any narrow way a matter of personal ambition, though of course he was a man of considerable and honourable ambition. It was to do with his belief that one had to acquire real power to do extensive good, and his wish to do the good as he saw it as extensively as possible.

To many readers, this will seem so obviously sensible as to merit no comment. But there is another view, expressed to me by a friend the other day, asking why he put everything into an in-the-end frustrated effort to become Prime Minister of the UK when he could have had a Prime Ministership of Scotland for the asking, had he acted on a certain view of the Scottish mandate after the 1992 election, or even earlier. The answer to that lies in his loyalty to the constitution and constitutionalism, as well as in a different view from my questioner about the possibilities of the exercise of power.

It was as an enhancement of the UK constitution that he finally came down in favour of a Scottish Parliament as a matter of principle. His advocacy as a Minister of the Scotland Bill in 1977-78 was initially perhaps a matter of putting the best case for a policy adopted out of political necessity rather than deep conviction. But the very act of arguing it through seemed to give him a new view of the underlying question. That, and his courageous and life-long

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Europeanism, gave him a particular stance on the whole question of subsidiarity, and in the end he wanted a far reaching reform of constitutional relationships in the whole of the UK, not excluding entrenchment of a Bill of Rights and radical reform of the House of Lords.

He never seemed to me much of a political theorist or philosopher. He was in some ways very much the practitioner, the pragmatist, the operator, even. He was reputed to be formidably tough as a party leader, though genuinely in good contact with all wings of his party. I think he had very deep-held principles, and great fidelity to them; from this came his justified reputation for unshakeable integrity. He also had terrific loyalty to friends and colleagues and to his party, which he cherished as the vehicle for pursuit of his principles. As to the detail and working out of policy, he could be flexible, and was always more interested in the workable than in the perfectly ideal. Hence he could with good conscience revise his position even on deep questions like that of Scotland's constitutional relations with the rest of the UK.

'You have got to get power' was a saying of his that I remember from long ago, but often I think repeated over the years. The occasion I remember was in my parents' rambling and always open and hospitable flat in Glasgow. John was one of a crowd in for a ceilidh (in the old sense), and he fell into an argument with my father, then very ill with his last illness, in the kitchen. They were two of the most eloquent people I knew, and in their highland backgrounds and orientations to the world have come to seem to me more and more similar as I have looked back at them. The one had set his cap at an apparently unreachable ideal, and failed in the attempt. The other was embarked on a career, guided by a realism and commitment that went back to an old disagreement. 'You have got to have power' said John Smith. He gave his own life to that view. It is the saddest of ironies that a flaw of physical constitution deprived him of the opportunity that he had done all else to earn, and had practically earned in the end.

Politics and power apart, he was in himself a lovely man. When we laid him to rest in the Reilig Odhran, we felt that as real a memorial was in the hearts of his many friends and the many others his life had touched.

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