Bagehot

Alex Salmond, Little Englander

In his determination to dismember Britain, Scotland's leader has some sur allies

Jan 21st 2012 | from the print edition

ALEX SALMOND, leader of Scotland's pro-independence party and first minister of the Scottish government, has a revelation to share. Over the years, he confides, there has been a tendency among some people in Scotland to blame things that go wrong on the English. He adopts a sorrowful air, as if pondering—for the very first time—man's capacity for grievance.

Happily, Mr Salmond has a plan. He intends to hold a referendum on Scottish independence in the autumn of 2014. Gra homeland its independence from the United Kingdom, he says, and the honest folk of S will be friends with the "plain people of England". Flanked by a pair of large Scottish S flags, he quotes the homespun wisdom of a childhood family friend, predicting that, afi independence, England will lose a "surly lodger" and gain a "good neighbour".

Mr Salmond calls himself the most Anglophile figure in Scottish politics. He has "great that the English people can craft a modern new identity without the "appendage" of Br a public lecture in London on January 24th, he plans to argue that the example of an independent Scotland will "reinvigorate" England, and old English traditions of radicali

Alas, there are a couple of reasons sharply to distrust Mr Salmond's vision of the Scots English shaking hands over the corpse of Great Britain. One involves breathtaking pol hypocrisy. A more serious problem centres on Mr Salmond's oddly old-fashioned

understanding of identity in modern England.

Start with hypocrisy. For Mr Salmond to act dismayed by anti-English grumbling requi degree of political chutzpah bordering on performance art. He is the man who once ac Margaret Thatcher of imposing a "government of occupation" on Scots, and referred to British government's taxation of oil revenues from Scottish waters as probably "the gr act of international larceny since the Spanish stole the Inca gold".

As first minister, he has shown a genius for stoking cross-border resentments. There v indignation in England this month when he declared that—after Scottish independence British government should be liable for the bailed-out Royal Bank of Scotland and its v debts (London officials failed to regulate the banks, sniffed the first minister). North of border, Mr Salmond is portraying a legal wrangle with the British government over ho hold his referendum as a conspiracy by "Westminster politicians" to keep Scotland's m resources.

Defences can be mounted for Mr Salmond. He is an elected politician, opportunism is v politicians do. Mr Salmond is no bigot. He says, with feeling, that modern Scottish ider open to all: Pakistani Scots are as Scottish as any other.

Where Mr Salmond needs challenging, urgently, is over his vision for Britain. There he of date, and capable of wreaking real harm. Since his days as a gadfly member of the Commons in the 1980s, Mr Salmond has portrayed the British state as a relic, calling i "fundamentally unattractive" and sunk in xenophobic decline. As late as 1999, accordi biographer David Torrance, Mr Salmond told the BBC that Britishness had been claime identity by thugs and racists, while Englishness was an "aristocratic, almost medieval concept".

Follow that line, and independence sounds like a progressive act to promote friendship between the yeomen of England and the brave hearts of Scotland, liberating two ancie cultures from the moth-eaten baggage of imperialist, embittered Britishness.

But Britishness has evolved. Two decades ago, it was a complacent default identity, wi English using Britain when they meant England. Now, it is becoming a consciously-cho layer of identity, especially among immigrants, from British Muslims to black Britons a beyond.

Englishness is the subject of a tussle. To some, it carries nastily tribal, exclusive overt Racists want to appropriate the English flag of St George, as they appropriated the Un for a time, decades ago. Their adversaries, like the left-wing singer Billy Bragg, are as enthusiastic as Mr Salmond about England's radical tradition. In between those two po there is evidence suggesting a link between the rise of Englishness and feelings of bei served by the status quo. YouGov, a pollster, recently compared voters who called the English with those who identified as British. Those feeling "English" were more likely t to leave the European Union, by a margin of 58% to 37%. New research by IPPR, a th tank, shows Englishness rising in popularity, alongside a growing sense that the Englis not fairly represented in the British Parliament.

Not only British, but also

Painfully for Mr Salmond, who professes to love the EU and loathe the Tory party, his strongest sympathisers in the House of Commons are English Conservative MPs on the Eurosceptic right. Many are tempted to wave goodbye to a Scotland they see as a "sub People's Republic", says a Conservative MP from the 2010 intake. The move would hav happy side-effect of depriving Labour of scores of seats. The traditional Tory attachme union no longer stirs the grassroots, says the MP, who during his hunt for a seat earne loudest cheer by asking why the English could not declare independence from Scotlan

Mr Salmond rejects such talk. Tory right-wingers do not mean what they say, he snap want to hold Scotland fast."

The SNP leader has a right to argue for Scottish independence. But to make that case, seeking to make the English into foreigners, and deny millions of hyphenated Britons, Anglo-Scots to black British, the country in which they feel at home, Britain. That is n progressive act, nor a modern one. Warm words about friendship between neighbours excuse it.

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