

Scottish Nationalist Party leader Alex Salmond announces sudden resignation

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25 July 2000

After 10 years in the leadership of the Scottish National Party, Alex Salmond announced his resignation last week. Speaking at a press conference held in the Banff and Buchan constituency for which he is a Westminster MP, Salmond said that his decision, which was unexpected, was because he expected the party to do extremely well in the next Scottish elections due in 2003. Such success would require another lengthy period of political commitment, Salmond said, which for personal reasons he felt unable to make. He was therefore making way in time to enable a new leader the necessary space to find his or her feet. Salmond did however indicate that he intended to remain politically active in the SNP, perhaps seeking a European role.

Despite his nonchalant reasoning, Salmond's resignation comes amidst sustained criticism of his leadership since the elections to the newly created Scottish Parliament in 1999. During the election campaign for the new body, Salmond likened NATO's on-going bombing raid against Serbia to Nazi Germany's attacks against Glasgow during World War II. The NATO action was "unpardonable folly", he had said, calling for the imposition of United Nations sanctions against the Serbia regime instead.

His statements were motivated by the SNP's orientation to Europe, where several parties had spoken against the NATO bombing because they viewed it as an attempt by the US to assert its military dominance over the continent. Salmond's breach in the all-party support in the UK for the war brought the full weight of government and media ire down on the SNP. A virtual media blackout was imposed on the SNP's election efforts, forcing the party to launch its own daily newspaper for the duration of the campaign.

The Blair government went on the offensive against

Scottish independence, accusing the SNP of trying to break up families and commerce with their imposition of new borders between Scotland and England. Glasgow's Govan shipyard was saved from closure only by a military order from the UK Ministry of Defence.

Subsequently, the SNP kept well clear of any further statements on the war against Serbia, focussing instead on their "Scotland's penny" campaign—a last minute scheme dreamt up by Salmond to oppose a Labour Party tax cut. In the end, the SNP won a mere 35 of 129 seats—a poor result for a party that only a few months previously had been 14 percent ahead of Labour in the polls. In the aftermath, Salmond has sought to soften the party's stance on Scottish independence.

This made him the target of a campaign by the party's "fundamentalist" wing. This includes Ian Blackford, the former SNP treasurer who is currently suspended from membership and is embroiled in a dispute with the party leadership over loans he made during the 1999 election campaign. Blackford, a senior manager with the Deutsche Bank, accused Salmond of "dereliction of duty" over his apparent back-peddalling on independence.

Another critic who has accused Salmond of having "lost the plot" is Member of the Scottish Parliament Margo MacDonald. Her husband, ex-SNP Westminster MP turned business consultant and newspaper columnist Jim Sillars, had regularly attacked the SNP leader in the pages of Rupert Murdoch's *Sun*.

Even prior to Salmond's resignation there were clear indications that the party was shifting towards a more aggressive assertion of Scottish independence. In a recent statement on central government funding for the Welsh and Scottish areas, Salmond himself had complained, "the need for fiscal autonomy for the Scottish Parliament becomes ever clearer."

Explaining what “fiscal autonomy” means, *Glasgow Herald* columnist Murray Ritchie noted, “it means Scots paying their own way by gathering their own taxes, regardless of the Treasury and Westminster and passing on an agreed sum to London for central services and costs such as defence and foreign affairs. If fiscal autonomy ever comes about it will make Scotland the most economically independent ‘region’ in Europe—and probably the most prosperous—not least because full fiscal control would mean Scotland keeping oil and whisky revenues.”

In an interview with the *Sunday Times* on July 23, Salmond admitted that his resignation was bound up with resolving the issues of political perspective within the SNP. “Confused signals” on independence during the 1999 election had lost it votes, Salmond said. The new leader would have to sharpen the party's appeal to Scotland's business community, he continued, and present “the acceptable face of the Scottish independence movement”.

The leadership elections will be held in September but the contest has already begun. Alex Neil, another “fundamentalist”, has officially declared his candidacy. Other potential candidates include deputy leader John Swinney, SNP business manager Mike Russell, and justice spokesman Roseanna Cunningham.



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