From British Labourism to Scottish Nationalism: Jim Sillars's Journey

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Jim Sillars, *A Difference of Opinion: My Political Journey* (Birlinn, 2021)

Jim Sillars made the political journey from Labour to Scottish nationalism decades before it became fashionable to do so. His transition from a Labour loyalist known as 'the hammer of the Nats' to a leading figure in the SNP is a long-standing folk tale of Scottish politics. Now Sillars has given us his own version of his life-story in a compelling autobiography, *A Difference of Opinion* (2021).

Like Nicola Sturgeon, Jim Sillars was born and brought up in Ayrshire. 'If I am a nationalist of any kind', he says, 'it is an Ayrshire one' (p. 126). Sturgeon was born in 1970 in the new town of Irvine, a typical product of the town planning ambitions of the post-war years, complete with modernist housing developments, roundabouts galore, and what was purportedly Europe's largest leisure centre, the Magnum. Sturgeon is a classic product of the opportunities that the British welfare state still offered to working class families in the late twentieth century. She grew up in a council house, attended the local comprehensive school, and studied law at Glasgow University. Even the Magnum Leisure Centre had been built by the Irvine Development Corporation, in effect a local arm of the British state.

Jim Sillars was born in a different political era, in nearby Ayr, in 1937. Very much an old town dating back to medieval (and independent) Scotland, Ayr combined a significant middle-class population with large council estates brought within the town boundaries in the mid-twentieth century. To the east and south of Ayr lay the Ayrshire coalfields and a string of villages and towns dominated by the classic solidaristic culture of mining communities. As Sillars movingly recounts, he grew up in council housing in Ayr at a time of economic austerity, restricted opportunities, and debilitating ill-health. He lost his mother to TB at the age of 4. Sillars's father was a railwayman, a strong Labour supporter, who Sillars remembers spontaneously dancing with a neighbour in celebration at Labour winning the 1945 election. Although he made it to a selective secondary school, university was not on the agenda for the young Sillars and he was apprenticed at the age of 15 to be a plasterer. The apprenticeship did not last long, as Sillars objected to being exploited for cheap labour. It is an emblematic incident that, in the hands of a scriptwriter, would almost be too on the nose in foreshadowing the dramas to come.

As his book reveals, Sillars's life followed an arc that would once have been familiar in the labour movement but is now much rarer. He is a working-class autodidact, his intellect and worldview honed through personal study and industrial struggle rather than institutions of higher education. But whereas others who followed that path made good careers for themselves in the Labour Party, Sillars always possessed a streak of independence that prevented him from ever resting easy in a political party. Had he stuck it out in either the Labour Party or the SNP, then there is little doubt he could have become a senior frontbencher or government minister, either at Westminster or in Holyrood. But, with the partial exception of his period at the top of the SNP between 1988 and 1992,

Sillars was never willing to make the necessary sacrifice of principle that any frontbench politician must make to uphold collective responsibility. Sillars, though by upbringing a staunch collectivist, was too much of an individualist to ever become an effective leading politician. In that respect at least Sillars resembles most people, who likewise often find the ideological contortions required of political leaders unappealing.

Strangely, Sillars's real political formation was in the Royal Navy, which he enlisted in aged 17 to avoid having to join the army for his period of national service. Stationed in Hong Kong, Sillars's time as a naval radio operator were crucial in bringing to the fore his skills as an advocate and leader, as he butted up against the Navy's hierarchical organisation and operated as an informal shop steward on behalf of the enlisted men in his unit. Sillars also developed intellectually in these years. Inspired by a friendship with a like-minded Scottish soldier, Tony O'Donnell, and drawing on the formidable resources of the Kowloon YWCA library, he read Marx, Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, and R. H. Tawney, becoming passionately engaged in political debate with his fellow servicemen. Serving at the sunset of the British Empire, Sillars's time in Hong Kong imparted to him an abiding hatred of imperialism and racism, both of which he witnessed at first hand in Hong Kong. Sillars emerged from the Royal Navy in 1960 a convinced socialist and joined the Labour Party shortly afterwards.

Thereafter his life might well have taken a predictable, or at least more conventional, path. Sillars took a job in the Fire Brigade, which in turn led him to become involved in the Fire Brigades Union, which then drew him into Labour politics. Invalided out of active service as a firefighter, Sillars landed on his feet by securing a post as full-time election organiser for the Ayr Constituency Labour Party and winning election to Ayr Town Council on the Labour ticket. It was the sudden appearance of the SNP as a serious electoral threat to the Labour Party that made Sillars's reputation. In the wake of Winnie Ewing's shock victory over Labour at the 1967 Hamilton by-election, Sillars took the fight to the Nats with a well-received speaking tour and a pamphlet entitled 'Don't Butcher Scotland's Future', which made a robust case for the Union as a vehicle for working class advancement. Sillars's political philosophy was resolutely British in its frame of reference at this time. Growing up, his household heroes had been Clement Attlee, Stafford Cripps and Nye Bevan and Sillars was committed to a trade union movement that spanned Britain. As a result, Sillars recalls, 'the SNP message of independence had no meaning for me' (p. 61).

Sillars became the Labour MP for South Ayrshire in a by-election in 1970, taking on a seat that had previously been represented by Emrys Hughes, Keir Hardies's son-in-law. South Ayrshire was Sillars's kind of seat – dominated by coal mining and a labourist political culture. He fondly recalls how testing the public meetings were during the by-election campaign, since 'the NUM had a very good programme of political education and the general public in the mining areas was well-read and many knew their Marxist theory' (p. 80). But Sillars's experience as a Labour MP, which lasted until he left the party in 1976, was a disenchanting one. He became increasingly haunted by the structure of the Anglo-Scottish Union, which inevitably (by dint of England's size) marginalised Scottish interests and political preferences. Sillars became convinced that the Scottish economy would continue to falter without an activist Scottish parliament to remedy its decline. With the Labour Party narrowly re-elected to government in two 1974 general elections (and the SNP once again closing in on Labour's Scottish seats), Sillars found himself at the maximalist pro-devolution end of the PLP. In his view, any scheme for Scottish devolution would need to include significant economic powers, for example control of industrial development spending. Furthermore, he went on television to promise that Labour would deliver such a parliament in a Scottish party political broadcast in October 1974. Sillars was therefore stunned to discover that the minimalist version of devolution that was rolled out by Harold Wilson's government after that election did not live up to his public promise to the

electorate. It served up a fatal confrontation between party loyalty and personal conscience. For Sillars, there could be only one winner.

Sillars now describes his subsequent decision to leave the Labour Party in 1976 to form a new, distinctively *Scottish* Labour Party (the SLP) as 'a rush of blood to the head' (p. 112). But there was some logic to his political entrepreneurship. It is striking in retrospect how much of the subsequent strategy of Scottish nationalism was already present in embryonic form in Sillars's SLP. For one thing, the SLP proved extremely attractive to middle class intellectuals influenced by the New Left (Tom Nairn, for example, was an active member), demonstrating an unserved appetite for a synthesis of left-wing and nationalist politics among the Scottish intelligentsia. For another, Sillars pitched the party as taking advantage of Britain's membership of the European Community (which Sillars, like the SNP, had originally opposed). The SLP supported an autonomous Scottish state within the EC, a model of independence that could retain intact Scotland's existing trading links with the rest of the UK. Sillars's vision of 'independence in Europe' eventually became the guiding maxim of the SNP right the way to the present day (even though, true to form, Sillars himself later disavowed the strategy and voted to leave the EU in 2016). Of course, the founders of the SLP under-estimated how difficult it was to start a new party and how hard it would be to win over Labour's working-class voters. The miners of South Ayrshire were not as moved by Sillars's pitch as the university lecturers and journalists who in practice made up the SLP's activist base. Sillars himself found it hard to exert his authority over a party that channelled a New Left style of politics that he didn't have much interest in. Although it limped on for a while, the SLP failed to make an electoral impact. Sillars lost South Ayrshire at the 1979 general election, shortly after finding himself on the losing side of the first devolution referendum. For all his misgivings about Labour's minimalist offer of a Scottish Assembly, Sillars still supported it as a first step towards something better.

And so, inevitably, to the SNP. The SLP was the bridge that brought Sillars, and some other like-minded socialists, into a nationalist movement that in the early 1980s was ambivalent about presenting itself as on the left. But many of the most dynamic figures within the SNP were seeking to turn the party into an explicitly socialist organisation. Sillars became their ally, participating alongside future SNP politicians such as Alex Salmond and Roseanna Cunningham in the '79 Group, which aimed to transform the SNP into a socialist party to compete electorally with the Labour Party. This initiative wasn't particularly successful in the short-term, since many members of the '79 Group were expelled from the SNP for their troubles (though some returned shortly afterwards). But it started the SNP's journey towards a more decisively social democratic stance. The 1980s and 1990s mostly consisted of various failed attempts by the SNP to outflank Scottish Labour to the left. It took the advent of the Scottish Parliament – and the declining fortunes of Labour in government in London and Edinburgh after 2005 – for the strategy to bear serious electoral fruit. But for Sillars personally, the apotheosis of pushing the SNP to the left came when he won the Glasgow Govan constituency from Labour in a 1988 by-election. His victory inaugurated a rare foray into the exercise of front-bench responsibility, including a period serving as deputy leader of the party under Alex Salmond. Govan has of course been a totemic seat for the SNP: it was previously won for the party by Margo MacDonald in a 1973 by-election (MacDonald and Sillars famously married in 1981). It was won again in 2007 by Nicola Sturgeon as the party entered government at Holyrood for the first time.

Perhaps because of the scars on his back from the 1970s debates about devolution, Sillars was by this time uninterested in taking a gradualist road to independence that started with a Scottish Parliament lodged within the UK. In this he found himself allied with Gordon Wilson, the SNP's leader before Salmond took over in 1990. Wilson was no socialist but he and Sillars were together

instrumental in ensuring that the SNP refused to take part in the Scottish Constitutional Convention, the influential cross-party initiative to draw up a scheme for Scottish self-government. It's possible that in taking this stance they simply reflected the balance of opinion within the SNP, since the party had little appetite for further entanglements in devolutionary politics after the disappointments of the 1970s. Given how things have worked out, though, it seems strange that as incisive a thinker as Sillars did not anticipate that a devolved Scottish parliament would transform the political prospects of the SNP. Devolution created a large group of elected SNP representatives, enabled the party to become a competitor for government office, and provided a national democratic platform for Scottish political debate. In his book, Sillars is unrepentant about the decision to opt out of the Constitutional Convention and indeed remains sceptical about the model of devolution created in 1999 (he even abstained in the 1997 devolution referendum). Since it is surely the advent of devolution that has enabled the cause of Scottish independence to become much more popular than it was in the late twentieth century, Sillars is not at his most convincing when defending this part of his record.

Sillars lost Glasgow Govan in the 1992 general election and stepped back from the frontline of politics, exiting the stage with a famous complaint about Scots being '90-minute patriots', who were happy to cheer on the national football team but lacked the patriotic fibre necessary to secure self-government. Thereafter he worked for the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce, promoting business links between Britain and the Middle East, and supported Margo MacDonald's political career after she was elected to the Scottish Parliament in 1999. As Sillars puts it, 'As a former Royal Navy rating I could take on all the housework no problem' (p. 227). Sillars writes affectingly about his relationship with MacDonald, as well as poignantly recounting her battle with illness in her later years.

Margo MacDonald passed away just before the 2014 independence referendum, but she insisted Sillars take part in it in her absence. Sillars's recollections of that campaign would have been a fitting conclusion to the book. Instead, he appends some final remarks about current affairs, including his thoughts about climate change (of which he is sceptical) and the West's relations with Putin's Russia. Some readers, including this one, will find this part of the book an unnecessary distraction from the life story the book recounts. Indeed, earlier in the book Sillars also feels the need to voice support for Alex Salmond, someone Sillars had a tense relationship with when he was Salmond's colleague, but who Sillars now sees as a victim of persecution by senior figures in the SNP. The book would have been much improved by maintaining a tactful silence on these subjects, but a tactful silence is not the Sillars style.

Why did Jim Sillars take the path he did? The answer, he says, is that he was not personally ambitious. This liberated him from toeing any party lines: 'being free from personal ambition, as distinct from ambition to improve the lives of others, means being free to state matters as you see them, irrespective of the consequences at a personal level' (p. 283). Anyone who has followed Sillars's career will have little doubt that this is indeed the philosophy by which he has lived. However, Sillars was not just willing to speak his mind but also to change it. He made a significant ideological shift from a classical British Labourism to one that increasingly saw Scotland as a distinctive, and more favourable, arena for democratic socialism. At the time Sillars made that move, the late 1970s, he was an outlier. But as Scottish Labour's current electoral travails demonstrate, Sillars's advanced nationalism is now a widespread view among Scottish voters. In the seat closest to Sillars's old stomping ground of South Ayrshire, Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, Labour came third in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections behind the SNP and the Conservatives. Jim Sillars is one of the key figures in the history of Scottish nationalism who brought about this transformation. Today's SNP politicians have in part prospered by speaking a language of 'independence in Europe'

that Sillars coined. Characteristically, though, rather than bask in these achievements, Sillars has instead devoted the last few years – and now many pages in his autobiography – to registering his disagreements with those who followed in his footsteps. Today's SNP, he thinks, does not campaign hard enough on the goal of independence and is naïve about the undemocratic character of the EU, not to mention the opposition to independence from member states such as Spain (Sillars favours Scottish membership of EFTA instead). Readers won't agree with everything in his book, but they will undoubtedly finish it with a clear understanding of what has made Sillars such a unique presence in Scottish public life – and with regret that we will not see his like again.

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