

Jim Sillars

Question: Which prominent Scottish politician does this description fit?

'He is regarded as one of the brightest of the recent intake of new young MPs. On the radical left of the party, he played a prominent role in Labour's unsuccessful campaign in the recent Govan by-election; during the campaign he referred frequently and contemptuously to the Scottish National Party (SNP) as 'Scotland's Tartan Tories'. Many in the party - and outside - see him as destined for high office in a Labour government. He is, however, not universally popular among his fellow Labour MPs.

Answer: It depends which year you're thinking of. If the year is 1989 it is Brian Wilson, recently-elected Labour MP for Cunningham North. But if the year is 1973 the answer is Jim Sillars, then the recently-elected Labour MP for South Ayrshire.

For two politicians with such similar backgrounds, there's no love lost between Sillars and Wilson. More than that, the enmity between the two is likely to be a major stumbling block to Scotland's anti-Thatcher majority as they try to make sense of the political landscape after the Nationalists' landslide in Govan.

Back in 1973, when Jim Sillars dismissed the SNP as 'Tartan Tories' he had two things in mind. One was the Nationalists' incoherent set of policies which tended to lurch from the far right to the mid-left depending on who happened to have influenced the last party conference. His other concern was that the SNP should be penned in their rural heartlands; if voters in Labour's traditional industrial fiefdoms could be persuaded to see the Nats as Tories in kilts then they would make little impression.

This response to the SNP was risky for the Labour Party in 1973. Margo McDo-

nald - now married to Jim Sillars - won that year's Govan by-election for the SNP, and, although Labour won it back at the general election three months later, by October 1974 the SNP had 11 MPs and over 30% of the popular vote in Scotland.

At the same time, Sillars was going through his own political upheaval. Disillusioned by the British Labour Party's reluctance to adopt a positive approach to Scottish devolution, in 1975 he launched the Scottish Labour Party. With just one other MP, a handful of Labour activists and the enthusiastic support of certain sections of the Scottish media, he set out, single-handedly to redraw the political map. The enterprise ended in 1979 when he lost his South Ayrshire seat by a narrow margin to the official Labour candidate. Sillars joined the SNP the following year.

So what is the significance of a second SNP by-election victory in Govan after 15 years? Jim Sillars is trying to make it easy for Labour supporters to discard their instinctive distrust of nationalism. In his acceptance speech at Govan he adopted the victor's magnanimity towards his old colleagues in the Labour Party. Some of them, however, found this even harder to suffer than the smugness they expected. They were, after all, still smarting from Sillars' well-targeted jibes about the 'feeble fifty', referring to the frustrating inability of 50 - now 49 - Labour MPs to protect Scotland from 'that bloody woman'.

Sillars has two good reasons for feeling pleased with himself. Not just the victory at Govan - that was the icing on the cake. More important, he can look back over the last eight years since he joined the SNP and recognise the major contribution he has made to shifting the Nationalists' centre of gravity leftwards to a point where it can



Jim Sillars: Shifting the Nationalists leftwards

convincingly claim to be a European-style left-of-centre party. Tartan they may be, but not Tories.

But where does Sillars' victory leave Scotland's overwhelming anti-Thatcher majority? No further forward unless they can get their act together.

A handful of Scottish Labour MPs are starting to talk of electoral pacts between the opposition parties in order to deal the *coup de grace* to the Tory presence north of the border.

It is, however, hardly conceivable that shadow Scottish secretary Donald Dewar - never mind his front bench colleague Brian Wilson - would approve an electoral pact with the Nationalists. They still dream of taking power in a British Labour government.

Perhaps, then, the poll tax will provide the trigger for a rebellion which would make Scotland practically ungovernable by an English Tory government. Perhaps, but probably not.

While Jim Sillars and the

SNP can call on Scots who can afford the surcharges to refuse to pay the tax, Brian Wilson and the Labour Party insist mass non-payment is a pointless exercise. With politicians divided and local authorities the main losers from non-payment it is difficult to see how the poll tax can provoke more than an impressive, but ultimately futile, gesture. Mrs Thatcher will not roll over and stick her limbs in the air just because 100,000 Scots delay payment of their poll tax by a few weeks.

In November 1973, when the voters of Govan elected Mrs Margo MacDonald the SNP declared Scotland would be independent by the end of the decade. By the end of the decade the SNP were reduced to two seats at Westminster. In November 1988 when the voters of Govan elected Mr Margo MacDonald, the SNP declared Scotland would be independent by the end of the century. By the end of the century we shall see. •
Brian Barr