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Coverage of the 2015 election

# It's ugly politics as usual as the big Scottish beasts of Westminster prepare to exit

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'Just as well we're off. If the polls are right, we could all be for the shredder.' Danny Lawson/PA

If as predicted this becomes the first general election in which people vote in much larger numbers for the Scottish National Party (SNP), it will accelerate a major movement away from Scotland's prominence in Westminster.

This produced many big beasts over the years, including John Smith, Donald Dewar, Charles Kennedy, David Steel and Robin Cook, before reaching its peak when Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling commanded the two most important jobs in British politics.

It also looks like there will be more women MPs in Scotland, although a shift from the current

22% to perhaps as much as 30% seems more of a damp squib than a revolution. It is obviously a long way short of the campaign for 50:50.

This seems a better indicator of the slow rate of change in Scottish politics than the mooted sea change in favour of the SNP. Scottish politics often seems as adversarial and bitter (and in many cases, sexist) as it has ever been.

## Tin hats and country dancing

Much has been made, for example, of the fact that Labour whip David Hamilton's description of Nicola Sturgeon as "a wee lassie with a tin helmet on" was made by a "dinosaur" MP, about to retire from office, and finally free to pursue his dream of performing a Bernard Manning tribute act.

My impression is that the vast majority of criticism has come from SNP/Yes campaign supporters eager to describe it as a problem for Labour, and to put prominent Labour women in the uncomfortable position of having to denounce his speech. In fact, it looks more indicative of the behaviour of men in positions of power – a wider and more important problem that has been lost in the clamour for partisan advantage.

Perhaps this point is clearer when the problematic statements come from media rather than party sources, such as The Sun (England edition) mocking up a picture of Nicola Sturgeon onto the body of Miley Cyrus. This sort of thing can have a much longer-term effect than the short-term use of an image for party-political gain.

The same problem of partisanship clouding important cross-party issues might be identified in the reaction to the use of two misguided references to make political points. One was Guardian cartoonist Steve Bell's reference to an obscure "incest and folk dancing" quotation to (I think) lampoon the SNP's desire to demand more than Labour can offer in any coalition deal. It was heavily attacked on Twitter in Scotland.



Steve Bell, The Guardian, 9 March 2015

Then there was the reference by Robin McAlpine, the director of the leftist Common Weal movement, to kidnap and child rape to describe Scotland's place within a dysfunctional UK family. It arguably fell into the same sort of category as the Bell cartoon, but received barely any comment.

The contrast creates a sense that any sensible cross-party criticism of these acts tends to be lost in the clamour to gain party political advantage by drumming up opposition to an imaginary foe.

This seems symptomatic of the worst excesses of Westminster politics: while we might be seeing changes in the parties' fortunes, there is continuity in their electoral practices – a problem exacerbated by the many media outlets putting pressure on party leaders to play that game.

## New faces, old tricks

Even though first-past-the-post elections are no longer delivering a two-party race, parties are still following the old rules of the two-party system that were the bread and butter of all

those big beasts of yesteryear. Tell people to vote tactically rather than according to their preference ("vote X, get Y").

Deny that you would enter a coalition with any other party, even if you have no chance of being in government on your own. And with the help of supportive media, humiliate your opponents or demonise them when they exhibit the sort of practices that you know fine well go on in your own party.

Many of us hope that the legacy of the independence debate is higher participation and more sophisticated debate among an enlightened and enthusiastic public. It would be a shame if, instead, it reinforces the binary divisions and divisive behaviour of Westminster politics at a time when two-party dominance is under greater pressure than probably ever before.



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