

## 17.11.2014 The Scottish National Party Conference. A party riding the crest of a wave, and a stronger Scotland

85,884: the figure is posted on the giant screen behind the stage at Perth Conference Centre, much too small this year to accommodate the crowd of delegates sent by the different sections of the SNP from all over Scotland.

It's the number of members registered by the party's computers as the final session begins, the meeting where its new leader, Nicola Sturgeon, just elected to succeed Alex Salmond, will give the closing address. Barely a year ago, membership stood at 18,000, and campaigners had set themselves - with the proactive approach that is normal under such circumstances - the target of reaching 30,000 within twelve months. There are now three times as many.

A five-fold rise in members in a year, almost three times as many as the target: these figures are so striking that they bear witness to a real political revolution in Scotland. The impetus created by the referendum on 18 September is quite simply colossal, despite the victory for 'no'. The SNP no longer has a credible rival for political leadership in Edinburgh, and it is even positioning itself as a key party for the future majority in power in Westminster after the general election to be held next May.

These parliamentary elections have been identified by Conference as the main challenge for the SNP in 2015. The target: to obtain an absolute majority of the MPs that Scotland will send to Westminster, at least 30 of the 59, and to form, along with Plaid Cymru MPs from Wales, a swing group capable of forming - and hence of undoing! - the political majority in London. And all with a view to grasping the reforms promised by British leaders to ensure the 'no' victory in the referendum.

Because these promises were the key to snatching victory for the 'no' camp last September. Imagine that in France, François Hollande, Nicolas Sarkozy and François Bayrou were to co-sign the same letter published on the front page of all the main daily newspapers to formalise promises of independence made to Corsicans! That's exactly what the three main party leaders in Great Britain did - David Cameron for the Conservatives, Ed Milliband for the Labour Party and Nick Clegg for the Liberals, in a letter published on the front page of all the Scottish newspapers 48 hours before the vote. Never has Scotland been in such a position of strength for negotiating new powers, including tax powers.

Alex Salmond has decided to pass the reins of the party and the government to Nicola Sturgeon, announcing his intention to stand for election in May to take his place at the head of an SNP group that polls suggest will increase from 6 to 52 MPs, and to conduct negotiations on behalf of his party. And, he says, if the proposals do not match up to the promises, the referendum process will start again.

The rise of separatism was exponential throughout the campaign, accelerating during the final weeks before the vote. Paradoxically, it grew still more when the 'no' camp won. It gave the SNP the euphoria of victory almost as if 'yes' had won. The target of 30 MPs seems to have been exceeded already, given that the first polls are predicting 52!

The Labour Party, which currently holds almost 50 Scottish MPs and from which the SNP is expecting to take virtually all its seats, is now in the sights of the Scottish National Party's leader. Locally, they must be "picked off": Nicola Sturgeon is forcing the issue, announcing a new social direction for the Scottish government which she will take over within the week. The priority will be the health system and the fight against poverty, where she has announced new financial resources. Families will receive greater help with child care, with a doubling of current provision in five years. The SNP sees itself as the UK's counter-reference for social policy, aiming to embody the rejection of David Cameron's austerity policy.

In terms of the Westminster government, the SNP conference said that it was ready "to defeat Cameron", and hence to support the Labour Party to return to power in London. Nicola Sturgeon delivered a simple and terribly effective speech aiming to attract Labour voters who are drifting towards the separatist idea: SNP MPs will support Labour in London, so there is no point in voting for them in Scotland in order to keep Cameron and the right from power. In June 2015, the SNP, in alliance with Plaid Cymru, will therefore have fresh trump cards in hand to force the recognition of the rights of the Scottish people.

The EFA, of which the SNP is a key member, took its rightful place during the Perth Conference. Plaid Cymru, the SNP's Welsh sister party, was fully engaged in the debates and the media coverage, and its leader Leanne Wood received repeated ovations from activists. The SNP and Plaid Cymru will adopt a

common strategy in the coming months, and this represents a real advance in cooperation between EFA member parties in Great Britain.

One of the main fringe meetings at Conference was devoted to the EFA. I myself was present, representing Corsica and in my capacity of President of the European party, as were treasurer Lorena Lopez de Lacalle of the Basque Country and secretary general Jordi Solé, leader of the ERC in Catalonia.

This meeting was a success. Slipped into the schedule before the main Conference event, Nicola Sturgeon's closing speech, it was attended by 250 delegates and under the chairmanship of SNP President and MEP Alan Hudghton and Fiona Hyslop, minister for culture and international relations, it strengthened the visibility of the EFA on the Scottish political scene. Debates obviously focused on the events in Catalonia, which Scottish activists were following closely. These concomitant struggles towards self-determination echo each other and resonate all the more powerfully at the European level. This internationalisation is vital to sustain pressure on the British government and to help the Scots in their quest for independence in Europe. Because the debate led by the Scots and the Catalans, closely followed by the forty parties in the EFA, will rebound on the European stage, before Parliament, before the new European Commission and throughout the press in Europe and beyond. Scotland and Catalonia do not only pose a problem of democracy in the United Kingdom and Spain. All Europe is concerned, and all Europe must accept the democratic rights of peoples, starting with the right to self-determination.

The Perth Conference therefore represents a significant step towards the new initiatives that the EFA will shortly take in Europe.