

27.10.2015 Scottish independence. The SNP in a position of strength

A year after the September 2014 election, which the “yes” camp lost with 45% of the vote, the Scottish National Party nevertheless finds itself in a position of strength. For in the wake of the referendum campaign it has experienced phenomenal growth. Its 2015 annual Conference has just been held in Aberdeen because its traditional venue in Perth is no longer big enough to host the crowd of delegates. This was the starting point for a fresh campaign, the campaign to elect the next Scottish parliament in Edinburgh.

A year before the referendum, the SNP had 30,000 members. In October 2014, at the Perth Conference following defeat, a huge screen behind the stage announced the figure of 84,000 members. A year on, the SNP has 114,000 members. In a country of five million inhabitants! That’s as though a party had 6,000 members in Corsica, or 1.2 million members in France.

From the rostrum, Nicola Sturgeon - who took over the leadership of both the party and of the independent Scottish government from Alex Salmond following the “no” victory - summoned the 56 SNP MPs elected to the Westminster parliament in May 2015 up onto the stage. 56 of the 59 MPs elected in all Scotland!

This overwhelming representation of the Scottish people is the political status quo which the SNP wants to maintain over time. And this political project will lie at the heart of the campaign for the forthcoming elections for the new Scottish parliament. By taking its place at the head of local institutions for the long-term, the SNP aims to establish the Scottish nationalist movement as the dominant force in Scottish politics.

In her closing speech to the Conference, Nicola Sturgeon emphasised the successes of the SNP’s eight years in power. She highlighted the social achievements: Scottish university students are exempt from the high tuition fees charged by the Conservative government in office in London on students elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The health system and its accessibility for the poorest in the community are incomparably better than in areas administered directly from London. The same goes for help for families and young children. She announced measures to strengthen these provisions, stressing the political implications: the social model to which the Scots aspire is light years away from the policy followed in London, and it can only be guaranteed by full independence, beyond the devolution which establishes the existing framework. Her criticism of London extends to international policy, where Nicola Sturgeon attacked David Cameron’s attitude to Syrian refugees. And at the end of the meeting, activists organised a collection in aid of the refugees.

But the British right is not really a rival in Scotland itself. For many years now, it has played no more than a walk-on part in the elections, benefiting first the Labour Party and then, for the last eight years, the SNP. So the current political adversary is Labour, which the SNP believes is incapable of eventually reversing the power of the Conservatives in London. Nicola Sturgeon is firm: the only defence against London’s ultra-liberal excesses is the SNP, with its social policies at the heart of Scottish institutions and its plans for Scottish independence within Europe.

She stresses the obvious argument - that Scotland belongs in Europe. At a time when London is entering a process of withdrawal from the European Union with a referendum into the bargain, she warns: the victory of Euro-sceptics would be contrary to the will of the Scottish people. The SNP is fighting to keep Scotland in the European Union and victory for the “no” vote in London would be an immediate reason for a new independence referendum in Scotland so as to leave London to withdraw from the EU alone.

But the immediate priority is not to call any new referendum, which nationalists do not want to rush into for fear of risking another “no” victory. Nicola Sturgeon wants to focus her troops on the political challenge ahead - the Scottish elections for the Parliament at Holyrood in Edinburgh. The SNP currently has an absolute majority there, and the target is to increase it. This will show London and Europe that the nationalists will be in power in Scotland for a long, long time to come, and that they will necessarily achieve their aims.

It is only a question of time.