

*A Difference of Opinion:*

*My Political Journey*

Jim Sillars

Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2021, £14.99

**John Booth**

There aren't many people still active in British politics who served in the Royal Navy when sailors were given 200 free cigarettes a month.<sup>1</sup> But Jim Sillars is one of them and has lived to reflect thoughtfully on the 65 years since he joined up 'to dodge' national service in the Army.

He was posted as a telegraphist to Hong Kong, and that, he writes, was 'the turning point in my life – when the politician within me finally emerged, as did the ability to take a lead position in a group, to take on authority and to write'.

This memoir provides a lively account of that life, from being Labour's 'Hammer of the Nats' in Scotland to becoming Alex Salmond's No 2 in the Scottish National Party. Along the way *A Difference of Opinion* sketches many of the political events and leading figures of his time and offers some challenging observations on the world he sees now as an active supporter of the Alba party.

After his return to Civvy Street in 1960, injury ended his career as a firefighter but did not hinder his entry into Scottish trade union and Labour party activism. He came under the instructive influence of Ayrshire council leader Danny Sim – 'a miner, a sea-green incorruptible and a man feared by many because of his intellectual and natural authority'. Sim, he writes, was meticulous in dealing with the people's money.

'Danny's expenses rules, which applied to councillors and officials, said a third-class ticket was all that was needed if going by rail. The county clerk often had meetings in Glasgow and had to pay the difference from his own pocket if he went first class.

---

<sup>1</sup> <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205146353>>  
<<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205146354>>

He had tests for invitations to conferences, which then and now flood into councils and other public bodies. Test 1: was it really necessary to attend? Test 2: would you spend your own money to go? If, in either case, the answer was no, then you shouldn't go.'

Sillars reflects: 'People like him are difficult to spot in today's public services.' The MPs' expenses scandal, Owen Paterson, and the sunshine freebies offered to MPs and councillors by foreign governments all come to mind, not forgetting PPE contracts for pals and the rest of the moral turpitude of Boris Johnson's Downing Street.

This political apprenticeship in Ayr seems to have fortified Sillars' personal values on a journey that took him into critical solidarity, and often conflict, with political allies. He tells how Robert Maxwell, in his 1964 bid to be elected to Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC), offered him a bribe.

Sniffing the political wind in Scotland three years later, Sillars recalls how when he told 'virulently anti-Communist' Labour National agent Sara Barker that we could lose to the SNP 'she was incredulous'.

Even before he was elected MP for South Ayrshire in 1970 he had formed critical judgements on some of Labour's leading lights. He says of Barbara Castle:

'Her Left-wing credentials meant nothing because she, like a number of others, only saw us in the abstract – good theoretical material – while we workers lived in a reality of which she appeared to have no understanding.'

Enoch Powell and Michael Foot 'could hold the Commons spellbound with their oratory, but if you read the speeches in Hansard the next day, Powell's was the one with more substance'. (Having once covered a Foot speech I returned to the office with my shorthand notes and found that as the basis for a news story the contents were about as solid as a meringue – and with much the same texture.)

He quickly concluded that Arthur Scargill, at that time emerging as a leader of the miners, was 'too egotistical and reckless'. Harold Wilson was 'an unprincipled, slippery customer who was not to be trusted'.

He took 'the CIA tour' of the USA with Neil Kinnock in 1975 soon after SNP leader Billy Wolfe had been hosted by the State Department.

'According to the US officials, he [Wolfe] told them that on the day Scotland won its independence, the Americans and the British would

immediately be told to get out of the nuclear submarine base at Faslane.

To my surprise, the US officials seemed to take this seriously. I was opposed to the base too but this was a delicate subject in the days of the Cold War and not a sensible hostage to fortune to throw in front of a US government that would not hesitate to employ the CIA against the SNP.

I was right. During the key period before the 1979 referendum [on a Scottish Parliament], the US Consul General in Edinburgh was a retired CIA officer, who departed as soon as the referendum was over and was replaced by a career diplomat.<sup>2</sup>

It was on this US-funded trip that Sillars

'discovered Neil's romanticism – a facet of his personality that helped make him the loquacious speaker he became but one that was also a weakness. He could get carried away and that is precisely what happened at the now infamous Sheffield rally in 1992, widely reckoned to have been one of the reasons he lost the election.'

Later in his career he met Dundee-born George Galloway who had been close to Kinnock when he first moved south to head War on Want but later fell out with him.<sup>3</sup> Here's Sillars' assessment of 'tragic' Galloway:

'He has an acute political mind and he is a magnificent orator. As a debater, he can cut to the core of complex issues – as US Senators found out when he took them apart in a senatorial hearing in which they, not he, were supposed to emerge as victors.

Tragic? Yes because of one flaw – an inability to work with others and build a broad basis of support for the causes in which he has been involved. That flaw has taken him out of frontline politics time and again, when his ability was needed. He is now regarded as a maverick but he has all the ability to be much more than this.'

---

<sup>2</sup> If Sillars' recall is accurate this would make the unnamed retired CIA officer the second US official to spend time as Edinburgh Consul General at a critical political time. Joseph Godson, the US labour attaché who was close to Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell, was in the Scottish capital from 1968 until his retirement from the foreign service in 1971.

<[https://powerbase.info/index.php/Joseph\\_Godson](https://powerbase.info/index.php/Joseph_Godson)>

His younger son, Dean Godson, a former US Pentagon official and now a Tory peer, is director of the 'think-tank' Policy Exchange.

<<https://policyexchange.org.uk/author/dean-godson/>>

<sup>3</sup> Discussed in Tom Easton, 'Terrorism, Anti-Semitism and Dissent' in *Lobster* 47.

Not all the politicians he met were judged so harshly. He found Tam Dalyell, a doughty opponent on Scottish independence, someone of 'extraordinary integrity'.

And then there is Margo MacDonald, the campaigning nationalist he met and then married in the course of his political transition from Labour. Sillars says her death in 2014 after years as a Parkinson's sufferer left him 'incomplete without her. We were two halves of one whole.'

In the 1976 arguments over devolution Sillars and fellow Labour MP John Robertson launched the short-lived Scottish Labour Party (SLP). Then, after the fall of the James Callaghan government in 1979, he joined the SNP as part of its 79 Group that was pushing for socialist policies.

Until he was returned to Westminster in 1988 as the SNP MP for Govan – in another by-election 15 years earlier it had been briefly gained by MacDonald – Sillars studied law and worked for the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce (ABCC). As with his earlier Navy service in Hong Kong, this broadened his political understanding while, he says, not diminishing the socialist convictions that had led him into youthful activism.

Those beliefs at times made him an as uncomfortable a bedfellow in the SNP as he had been in Labour. He was an opponent of EU membership and this and other issues led to clashes with the Nationalist leader Alex Salmond and Sillars losing his Govan seat in 1992. He picked up work again with the ABCC and those experiences gave him some useful insight into Middle East affairs.

One big omission in Sillars' memoir is Lockerbie. This is particularly striking as the 1988 destruction of Pan Am Flight 103 is, after devolution and the Dunblane massacre, probably the biggest Scottish story of his lifetime. The subsequent trial of two Libyans remains a controversial issue<sup>4</sup> with a new book by Jim Swire,<sup>5</sup> the father of a Lockerbie victim, becoming the basis of a UK TV series later this year.

Sillars' silence on this huge issue is not unique. According to Swire, Margaret Thatcher's memoirs for 1988 contain only four words on the subject – and they only appear in her chronology: 'December 21 – Lockerbie bombing'.

*A Difference of Opinion* offers more on the invasion of Iraq in 2003,

---

<sup>4</sup> See the review of *Megrahi – You Are My Jury: The Lockerbie Evidence*, in *Lobster* 64 at <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster64/lob64-lockerbie-1988.pdf>>.

<sup>5</sup> Jim Swire and Peter Biddulph, *The Lockerbie Bombing: A Father's Search for Justice* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2021).

confirming the disastrous part played by Paul Bremer, the US-appointed administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority ruling Iraq. The author writes:

'A man with no experience of the Arab world, Bremer blundered from day one of landing in that country in May 2003. He barred the Ba'ath Party members from any governmental involvement depriving the country of an administration and making it ungovernable. He dismissed the whole of the Iraqi armed forces overnight leaving them with no income but still fully armed. It is doubtful if, in the entire history of imperialism, there has been such a calamitous appointment.'<sup>6</sup>

Sillars used the knowledge he acquired as a law student to pursue Tony Blair for Iraq war crimes, but his accumulated evidence did not impress the Scottish Crown Office and his efforts with the International Criminal Court also proved a dead end. He writes:

'The only route would be to find a state which classes aggression and regime change as crimes in domestic law and whose criminal justice system would be prepared to prosecute Blair. I worked with a Quaker group in York to try to find such a country in Europe but we were unsuccessful. Maybe one day Blair might land by accident in Iraq, where jurisdiction will not be a problem.'

There are some intriguing details in *A Difference of Opinion*. One is that Rupert Murdoch helped fund Sillars for 13 years as a weekly columnist in *The Scottish Sun*. That included the short period when he was SNP deputy leader. 'The money I earned from the *Sun* I used to provide additional funds for my office in Govan and the costs of campaigning nationally.' Sillars writes:

'When Bob [Bird, editor of the *Scottish Sun*] launched the independence edition on 22 January 1992, it was a sensation – the first and only paper with a large circulation to come out in support of the SNP's position. There was a huge boost to party morale and, with a major paper on a rising circulation punting the idea of independence, the SNP was in a better position in the public eye than ever before.'

---

<sup>6</sup> For more on Bremer's role on 9/11 see my 'Suddenly in September?' in *Lobster* 82 at <<https://tinyurl.com/4nann3mw>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster82/lob82-suddenly-in-september.pdf>>.

Bremer is named by Kevin Robert Ryan as a 9/11 suspect in *Another Nineteen* (Microbloom, 2013).

Another intriguing fragment is Sillars' suspicion that when he formed the SLP in 1976

'members of groups like the IMG [International Marxist Group], while genuine in their views, were useful idiots for MI5 and Special Branch. Numerous such groups have demonstrated time and again that they will ultimately damage or destroy any organisation to which they attach themselves.

After the SLP collapsed, I was invited to the US embassy to a discussion on how it happened, with the ambassador present. They were very interested in the IMG. The effect they had on the SLP was to exhaust us, and finally to be instrumental in blowing us to smithereens at our first conference in Stirling.'

Sillars is careful to say that

'the IMG was not the reason the SLP failed. Labour, with its solid backing from the trade unions was structurally strong and . . . there was no space for the SLP to develop and grow to a point where we had a strong enough national organisation that could seriously challenge it'.

Fast forward four decades and the Labour party and trade union movement in Scotland is a shadow of its former self with the SNP riding high in Holyrood. But this does not leave Sillars happy with its leadership past or present.

He admires the talent of Alex Salmond but didn't like his ways as SNP leader, seeing him being intolerant of dissent and allowing an admiring cult to flourish. He sees 'that authoritarian streak and a lack of empathy with and keen understanding of those who do not see Scotland's future as he does have kept him from being a great national leader. He could lift the party but never the nation.'

He sees the same control freakery with Salmond's protégé, Nicola Sturgeon:

'New leaders do not emerge naturally under an authoritarian system – promotion is not on merit but in the gift of the leader. Alex Salmond made and promoted Nicola Sturgeon. When she stood for the leadership on her own at Holyrood with Alex in Westminster, she was heading for defeat at the hands of Roseanna Cunningham. So Alex stepped back in and took over, having previously declared that was something he would never do. He saved her for another day and she duly inherited the leadership from him.'

Sillars says the cult of personality developed under Salmond has been transferred to Sturgeon – and with damaging consequences.

'First, it tends to invest in the leader all knowledge, judgement and wisdom required for the development of policies, which is actually a block on ideas and discussion and debate that is (sic) so essential in getting policies right. Second, it sows the seeds of future disaster because there are no brakes on the ego of the leader. Ultimately it ends in tears.'

He has this ominous prognosis for the SNP:

'I anticipate an ocean of tears when the full story emerges about how the civil and criminal cases involving Alex came about. There will be a price paid by the party for allowing itself to be in the grip of two personality cults for thirty years.'

Sillars' criticisms of Salmond have not stopped him supporting, while not himself joining, Salmond's Alba party. He has written policy papers on housing and a written constitution for it. At the age of 84 his considered political commitment continues when much younger prime ministers have long retired into the arms of investment banks.

In 2021 the Royal Navy banned smoking on its ships, one of the many changes Sillars has lived through in a long, activist life. In his concluding chapter, *Issues of Our Age*, he reflects thoughtfully on some of them. The lessons he draws from Scotland are also worth wider consideration.

'A new political class has emerged to lead and set the agenda for the working class – frequently an agenda that is different from what their needs and priorities actually are. In one of the most deprived areas of Edinburgh, the people are represented in the Scottish parliament by someone middle class who lives in the Borders and sent her children to private schools.

Not only there but also elsewhere, there is no match between working-class need and its representation in the corridors of power where policies are made. Somewhere, sometime, a new leadership group has to emerge from within the Scottish working class. The key is in its members finding again that high degree of self-confidence that my generation had.'

*John Booth is a journalist and writer.*

*He blogs at [Forthzando.com](http://Forthzando.com) and tweets at @JohnBooth2017*

