

Party in its prime

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Special correspondent

SNP veteran Winnie Ewing looks back over 75 years of the SNP

Madame Ecosse is in a typically feisty mood. Sipping sherry in the comfortably cluttered TV room in her home in douce Kilmacolm, the woman who has nothing left to prove still has plenty left to say. Five years older than her beloved Scottish National Party, which has just celebrated its 75th anniversary, Winnie Ewing is in fine fettle. The step is perhaps a little slower, the eyes slightly dimmed, but the mind is still sharp, and her judgment on the past and current crop of politicians who have crossed her path is as acerbic as ever.

Former Secretary of State for Scotland, Willie Ross? “So rude. A horrible man. Very objectionable.”

Current Secretary of State Jim Murphy? “A nasty piece of work, a spoiler, with no interest in the future of Scotland. Takes his instructions from London.”

Former energy minister Brian Wilson? “A horrible person. A nasty piece of work.”

First Minister Alex Salmond? “The outstanding politician in Scotland today. A very clever man.”

No real surprises there. Winnie Ewing has always had a down on Labour Party people who fail, as she sees it, to stand up and shout for Scotland. She has done just that all her political life, in Westminster, in Europe and in the “reconvened” Scottish Parliament. She is on record as saying: “The enemies of Scotland are the traitors within the gate, the unionist parties who, whilst claiming to be Scottish, don’t wish for their country the normal freedom that every world citizen expects for their country.”

She learned her politics at an early age, in the family home in Cathcart on the south side of Glasgow, where her father was an ardent supporter – politically and financially – of the Independent Labour Party. “He was a believer in Scotland running its own affairs,” she says, “and raised money for the ILP candidate to stand against the official Labour candidate. That was my first experience of watching people getting actively involved. My father



was very disillusioned with the Labour Party that he felt had turned its back on Scotland. He wanted power for Scotland, just as Canada had, to make more laws and to vote not to go to wars. Labour wasn’t nationalistic; it gave it up for power. It had sold the pass. I could see we were not a normal country because we had no real powers.”

She was an active member of the Glasgow University Scottish Nationalist Association where she was taking law. Her legal career was put on hold, however, on a momentous evening in Hamilton in 1967 when she snatched the seat from Labour. “Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on,” she said, and in truth, the world did seem to pause slightly as this young woman catapulted the SNP into “grown up” politics. “After the victory, telegrams came to me from all over

the world. It was an amazing experience,” she remembers. She took her seat in the House of Commons and immediately ran into hostility, mainly from Scottish Labour, because of her already established political connections with people who had long memories of the Independent Labour Party. “Many of them also remembered activists like my father and that annoyed older Labour members,” she says. “The Scottish Labour Party hated me. The English, Welsh and Irish MPs were ok. They were actually quite charming, thinking perhaps I was only a temporary visitor. But the Scots were so rude. They shouted abuse in the Chamber and insulted me in the corridors. It got so bad the Leader of the House had to warn them to behave.

“But I was a fighter – had to be – and because I was a good attender and asked lots

of questions, no one could fault me. When it came to the end of my time the Speaker told me no one had ever been treated so brutally by his or her fellow countrymen as I had been." Not everyone was an enemy. The Liberal leader at the time, Jo Grimond, was a good friend. "He was pretty well a nationalist and wanted Scotland to have more powers - over defence, for example - and to be more like Canada. He was very sympathetic and we talked in 1967 about the possibility of merging our parties in Scotland, but some of

That's when the dirty tricks started

the Liberals were very Londonised and we didn't pursue it."

Winnie was unsuccessful in retaining the Hamilton seat in the 1970 General Election, but was elected the Honourable Member for Moray and Nairn in 1974 to bag a further five years at Westminster. Those were seismic times for the SNP. 'It's Scotland's Oil' was the slogan which carried seven Nats into Parliament in March 1974 as SNP MPs; in October, 11 were returned in the repeat election. "Those truly were great years when we knew we could do anything," she says. "We were all very clever as speakers, workers and politicians. There was a palpable sense of change. Michael Foot said to me: 'Winnie, it's not the 11 MPs that terrify me, it's the 42 second seats you got'. And we really were breathing down their necks. That's when the dirty tricks started." The release of Cabinet papers from the time bears that out. Successive senior politicians lied about the amount of oil off Scotland's shores; boundaries were redrawn to reduce the amount in Scottish waters; propaganda poured out that Scotland could never afford to go it alone.

Winnie returns time and again during our conversation to the role of the press in anti-SNP campaigning. She firmly believes the editors of Scottish newspapers were instructed by London-based owners to come out against the party. "We were given a very tough time, although there were some who said 'never had so few people shown so much talent'. She is still bitter about the 40 per cent rule for the referendum vote. The 1979 referendum resulted in a narrow majority in favour of limited devolution. Parliament had set a condition that 40 per cent of the registered electorate should vote 'Yes' and despite a higher than normal turn out of more than 60 per cent, devolution was not enacted. 'Scotland Said Yes' became the campaigning slogan of the time, but devolution was

effectively killed off for two decades. Winnie is still bitter about what she calls 'the scandal of the 40 per cent fiddle'. "That finally was the nail in the coffin," she says. She disputes the perception that the SNP paved the way for Thatcher by voting against the Callaghan government. "We took umbrage at the 40 per cent rule, quite properly challenged the Government, and the Government fell. But



it was going to fall anyway; it was finished," she says.

Despite the disappointment, Winnie continued her political life, becoming a

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Member of the European Parliament in 1975. She lost the 1979 election in Moray and Nairn, but was directly elected to Europe within weeks. It was an experience as far removed from the dog-eats-dog politics of Westminster as she could imagine. "Europe was so different from Westminster. People were so pleasant, so different from the Commons, which is a miserable place. You could talk to people across all parties, make your points and persuade them by the right-

ness of your cause." She is proudest of her campaign to rid the seas around Europe of substandard tankers. The legislation enjoyed support from every country with a coastline. It was also in Europe that the nickname 'Madame Ecosse' was coined by French newspaper *Le Monde* at the time of the first election. She recalls: "I was quite a colourful character then. I wore a long tartan skirt, spoke some of the languages and was regarded quite favourably. The Labour Party said I had invented the phrase myself. It would not have occurred to me to call myself Madame Ecosse, but I liked it; it was a good label and evoked Scotland every time it was used." She was also known as the Mother of the House because of the length of time she served, but finally, in 1999, she gave up being an MEP and became an MSP in the historic first session of the Scottish Parliament.

"The lure of the Scottish Parliament was just irresistible. Robert Macintyre (the SNP's first ever Westminster MP) said to me: 'Don't call it a new parliament. Remind people the last parliament had been adjourned'. I took his advice and said: 'The Scottish Parliament, adjourned on the 25th day of March in the year 1707, is hereby reconvened.'" It was a hugely enjoyable, if humbling, experience. It was a "turning point in the political story of Scotland", she said. "Even when I won Hamilton in 1967, few people would have thought Scotland would have advanced so far as to have our own law-making parliament." She enjoyed her time there. "Holyrood is different politics," she says, "apart from mean-spirited Labour politicians. In some respects, it's a lot better; you have to win arguments; argue your case and persuade people to come along with you. It works, apart from Labour who have not changed their spots. It's getting there but it's not yet a dream come true. We need more powers - power to say no to war, which is killing lots of young people. Those extra powers are coming and people are beginning to realise this. Independence is still the goal and any suggestion that has been softened is down to the press." She also has praise for the SNP team. "Alex Salmond is magnificent as First Minister. He has forgotten and forgiven the past disagreements. He is good at choosing people for their jobs and good at keeping them happy, which is not easy. Mike Russell stood against him but I was quite pleased to see he'd offered Mike a good job."

She is disparaging of the quality of the Labour Party in Scotland and returns to her theme about the press. "It's high time the press pointed out the absolute inanity of them. It must surely be time for the press to stop giving them such an easy ride. I was a columnist for the *Daily Record* and even then

I never understood why the press has been so unsympathetic. But no matter what the press says, there is no way independence can be stopped now. The economic argument is so absolutely overwhelming. We are the source of energy; we have not yet exhausted North Sea oil, no matter what the press says; that's another myth. We have yet to tap the west coast. That's only a matter of time."

She has little time for people who say an independent Scotland would have suffered even more in the global banking crisis. "Scotland would not have let Dunfermline Building Society go down," she insists. "Alex Salmond made that perfectly plain. Why did it happen? Westminster wants Scotland to fail and to be able to say: You need us. But we don't. They need us. England is in a difficult plight. They can't cope with such a big population and with so many industries folding."

But if independence is not yet a dream come true, can it be realised in her lifetime? "I hope to live long enough to see it and in fact, I'm pretty set on that. It may happen very quickly. I understand that some of the civil servants in Scotland are beginning to be convinced that Scotland could go it

alone; they've been impressed by the way the SNP has performed in government and are seeing the light. Yes, the people have got to be convinced to vote at the ballot box. I don't preach the gospel in Kilmacolm but you have no idea how much sympathy there is here to the idea of independence in what you would

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take to be a totally Tory village.

"I do miss the cut and thrust of active politics, but I still shout at the telly at things that annoy me. But I'm happy to be out of it now. It's been a long stretch and really punishing in Europe with 6am starts. There was an incredible amount of travelling and I'm glad that's all gone. I'm sad and angry that Scots decry fellow Scots and say they can't run their own country. That's just awful. But it's not so bad now that Alex Salmond is there. He has made a huge difference to the way Scots think and feel about themselves."

These days the pace is a bit more relaxed. A Friday evening art class in the village and

time, at last, to catch up with her reading, rekindling her interest in Scottish literature and history. Winnie's house is dotted with cartoons and pictures of her and her family; pictures with Eamon De Valera, with the SNP MPs at Westminster, with the Mayor of New York and Sean Connery, but there are very few of her winning at Hamilton. "I've got one a supporter sent me and one taken at the victory count. I was probably the most photographed woman in Britain at the time but I couldn't afford to buy the photographs," she says.

She is slightly nervous, as we talk, about a documentary being screened that evening on BBC Alba about her years in politics. She wonders what some of the guest speakers might say. Ian Paisley is on. "He called me Scotland's John the Baptist," she laughs. "I got on well with him and he backed every one of my amendments in Europe." Tam Dalyell is there too. "A very fair man," she says. But it's Brian Wilson that troubles her more than anyone else. "He can be really nasty." I watch the programme on the iPlayer. She really didn't have much to worry about. Most of the contributors were fair. And Brian Wilson was Brian Wilson.

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