

A shameless and brilliant bluff from Scotland's Great Pretender



CHARLES MOORE

Twitter: @CharlesHMoore

Alex Salmond acts as if he already leads his own state – but most voters won't be fooled

At the Commonwealth Games opening ceremony in Glasgow on Wednesday, the singer John Barrowman (who has lived in the United States for most of his life) jumped out, dressed in tartan, from under a giant kilt. He sang, in a semi-Scottish accent, about the Loch Ness monster, "hairy coos", the Highlands, bagpipes, haggis...

This performance was supposed to be deliberately kitsch and self-mocking (the modern justification for every error of taste). But the plain truth is that you could not have a games opening ceremony in modern Scotland without this collection of touristic clichés. That – and whisky – is what Scotland signifies to audiences outside the British Isles. It is what the global market demands.

In his ground-breaking essay "The Coming of the Kilt", Hugh Trevor-Roper explained how the garment is very much not a part of Scotland's ancient heritage. It was invented by Thomas Rawlinson, a Lancashire ironmaster, as practical wear for the men who felled his trees and stoked his furnaces in Glengarry, near Inverness, in the 18th century. "We may thus conclude," wrote Trevor-Roper, "that the kilt is a purely modern costume, first designed, and first worn, by an English Quaker industrialist; and that it was bestowed by him on the Highlanders, not in order to preserve a traditional way of life, but to ease its

transformation: to bring them off the heath and into the factory."

The kilt, the tartan, Balmoral, the novels of Walter Scott – almost every famous emblem of Scottish self-consciousness – arose from the defeat of Scottish independence, not its assertion. They were distinctively Scottish elements to help compose the new Britishness. Only after the collapse of Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745 could this happen. The Prime Minister, William Pitt the Elder, formed the Highland regiments in this modernising spirit: "I sought for merit wherever it was to be found," he told Parliament. "It is my boast that I was the first minister who looked for it, and found it, in the mountains of the North. I called it forth, and drew into your service a hardy and intrepid race of men."

Nowadays, Scotland has its own First Minister, Alex Salmond. He says he is observing a "self-denying ordinance" not to talk about September's independence referendum while the Commonwealth Games are on. In fact, however, in their first 24 hours, he announced this ordinance to the media on three occasions, each time adding a "But..." which allowed him to revert to the subject of the vote.

Mr Salmond is skilfully, shamelessly, attempting to draw the hardy and intrepid race of men and women, otherwise known as Scotland, into the service of something different – himself.

It is really a brilliant bluff. Scotland had the Old Pretender and the Young Pretender; today, in Mr Salmond, it has the Great Pretender. His trick is to use the powers which devolution has given him to act as if Scotland already exists as a state, embodied in him.

All that he demands, he implies, is formal recognition of this grand fact. In April this year, he made a speech at the College of Europe in Bruges (or "Brugge", as he called it in a fraternal nod to Flemish nationalists), just as Margaret Thatcher had done in 1988. Scotland seeks its own sovereignty, the statesman told the assembled europhiliacs, only in order to be able to "share" it. The tartan has "patterns and threads of differing colours" into which all EU members can be woven. Scotland has 60 per cent of the EU's oil reserves, he alleged, and would be a net

contributor to the EU budget. The audience must have left under the impression that this grand little country of five million people was carrying out an altruistic reverse takeover of the other 495 million EU citizens.

The Salmond statelet has, of course, no jurisdiction in foreign policy, but already it has bestowed upon itself an informal system of Scottish ambassadors, and two "external affairs" ministers. One of these is the 30-year-old Humza Yousaf, who used to work for Islamic Relief, a charity closely linked to the extremist Muslim Brotherhood. This week, Mr Yousaf announced that Scotland would be home to Palestinian refugees fleeing Israeli attacks. No one pointed out that this gift is not – yet – in his power.

So when debating the merits of Scottish independence, one should not deal only with the arguments of principle. One needs also to ask what sort of government an independent Scotland would be likely to get. Mr Salmond kindly provides the answer every day. It would be a somewhat less noisy version of what the late Hugo Chavez gave Venezuela – Third-Worldish denunciation of richer neighbours, populist gestures of wealth-sharing (such as land reform) combined with policies of wealth-destruction, and a cult of the leader. There would also be a close identity between the state and the ruling National Party. No public servant who stood out against this would last long.

To all those who want revolution, Mr Salmond offers encouragement. At last the English yoke would be thrown off and Scots could reject globalisation and big banks (the First Minister has conveniently forgotten how he uses to boast about the biggest of all, the Royal Bank of Scotland). To all those who fear change, the Great Pretender offers comfort. Scotland will keep the monarchy, the pound, the regiments, he says, though he has no authority to decide these matters. Scottish membership of the EU will continue, he promises, through the principle of the "continuity of effect". This comes oddly from the man who is offering more discontinuity in the realm than anyone since the execution of King Charles I.

Why do people fall for it? Opinion polls

obstinately and almost unchangingly confirm that most Scots don't. On August 5, the television debate between Mr Salmond and the leader of the No campaign, Alistair Darling, will take place. Everyone expects the former to shine and the latter to plod. But Mr Darling is actually a living embodiment of one of Scotland's gifts to the whole United Kingdom – cool-headed good sense. It is a curious feature of this debate that he is somehow seen as the underdog when actually he speaks for the majority. That might work to his advantage.

Most of the arguments of the Yes side seem preposterous. (I particularly enjoyed this affronted voice of a novelist in the *Guardian* last week: "A no vote will create a profound and strange schism between the voters of Scotland and its literature.") But there is one point which keeps presenting itself, and which, from a "No" perspective, has uncomfortable force. It is that the Westminster model of parliamentary government which has united the country since 1707, is working badly. In 1940, this model was almost synonymous with "what we are fighting for". In 2014, it often means little more than "what we are laughing at". This is felt more acutely, perhaps, in Scotland than the south, but the mood is not that different from Land's End to John O'Groats.

Our politicians have been so careless of British representative democracy that one feels almost out of date trying to uphold it. If Scotland votes Yes, it will be lost. But even if the voters say No, it will need restoration and reform. We are being warned.

The Scottish story also contains a warning for Eurosceptics. Nigel Farage is England's Alex Salmond – amusing, clever, populist, opportunist and egotistical. I expect Mr Salmond to lose because, in the end, people will see his negativity. Euroscepticism should not be led in such a way that it suffers the same fate. British independence, after all, is not a fantasy stirred up in defiance of modernity. It is the presumption upon which all our institutions, and our idea of democracy, are based.

Comment on Charles Moore's view at

>> telegraph.co.uk/personalview

The Daily Telegraph, 26 July 20