

Salmond seasons politics with humour as he wins cheers in Town Hall

By Katie Macleod

On the afternoon of April 16th, every seat in Stornoway Town Hall was taken. All those in attendance were awaiting the arrival of the Scottish Cabinet and the First Minister, Alex Salmond, for a public meeting on 'Scotland's Future.'

The Cabinet – now numbering ten due to the recent additions of Shona Robison and Angela Constance – arrived in the hall following their official Cabinet meeting at the new MG Alba building on Seaforth Road, which was officially opened later in the day by the First Minister.

Alex Salmond confirmed that it had been "a normal Cabinet meeting, with a full range of issues on the agenda," adding that outside Edinburgh, Stornoway was the first place to have a second visit from the Cabinet, which he said is "trying to do its best for the future of the islands."

Amongst the topics on the table were renewable energy, issues concerning the Crown Estate, and the roll out of improved digital connectivity to the islands. With regards to the current campaign for devolution under 'Our Islands, Our Future', a government press officer said at the official briefing which followed the Cabinet session that "the Cabinet was clear that the discussion extended to all islands" – enlarging the area in question from the three councils (Orkney, Shetland, and the Western Isles) who are currently campaigning for it.

While the formal business of government all took place behind closed doors on Seaforth Road, the issues open for debate were aired at the Town Hall meeting, where members of the public were invited to put their concerns to the Cabinet at what was a campaign event for the 'Yes' vote.

In the run-up to Scotland's referendum, the First Minister and his Cabinet are making the case for independence at public Q&A sessions, entitled 'Scotland's Future', that are taking place across the country. To set the scene for the Stornoway edition, large screens with scenic film shots of Scotland were set up by the stage, and upbeat music filled the room.

Although open to people of all political persuasions, fans of the First Minister were obviously in attendance in large numbers, as his arrival after the rest of the Cabinet was greeted not just with applause, but the cheers, whoops and whistles more often associated with rock stars.

"It's an auspicious occasion to be back in Stornoway today," Alex Salmond began, informing everyone that just that morning the Gaelic edition of the white paper on Scotland's future had been published, with a summary edition sitting on every seat in the hall. "It's right and proper that we do it today." Gaelic was given pride of place on stage



In Stornoway Town Hall in front of the public and the media, First Minister Alex Salmond reviews his Cabinet's activities during their visit to the Islands

too, in the form of a large sign proclaiming 'Teachd na h-Alba' – Scotland's Future.

He also gave a brief welcome in Gaelic, laughing about how his accent bore the hallmarks of 'Barra pronunciation', thanks to Western Isles MP Angus MacNeil, seated in the first row. After giving Ministers the chance to tell the audience what they had been doing during their visit to the Western Isles (Joe Fitzpatrick visited the Scottish Salmon Company; Nicola Sturgeon cut the first sod at the Melbost Farm Housing Development; and all of them claimed a taste for black pudding) he then gave the hard sell about why Scotland "can", "should", and "must" be independent.

Whatever the political leanings of those in the Town Hall, it would be impossible to deny that Alex Salmond is a skilled politician. First standing at the lectern, then sitting in the front row of chairs set up on the stage, Salmond seemed not just at ease, but in his element whether during his speech or answering questions from the audience – answers that often came with a light-hearted joke attached.

"I'm 59 years old. Now, I can see each and every one of you thinking 'You don't look it'", Salmond said to laughter from the crowd. His joke was played on repeatedly throughout the afternoon. On being told he was looking very well for his age by a member of the audience, Salmond replied with a smile: "I'm on the 5:2 diet, Beyoncé and I are on it, and we're all making progress." Cue more laughter from the public, and even from the harried-looking political advisors typing hurriedly on their Blackberrys on the balcony.

Behind the jokes were more serious statements, shot through with the purpose of encouraging people to vote for the creation of an independent Scotland. As the first person to see the results from the Fios referendum poll on Facebook (which was in favour of a 'Yes' vote by 55% to 34%) the First Minister said that although "the rest of Scotland has a bit of catching up to do with the Hebrides," the results were "an indicator of the way the winds are blowing across the country."

The question-and-answer session that followed Salmond's speech covered the whole gamut of policy issues, from the local to the global. Locally, concerns over business contracts, infrastructure, crofting and religion were raised; while national questions on pensions, benefits, poverty and Trident all had a look in too.

With the intent of including all areas of the Western Isles, Twitter was used to give residents of Barra, Benbecula, and Uist a chance to put forward their questions in advance of the event itself. While most were serious, one question the Cabinet chose to answer was unlikely to have been submitted by an island resident, concerned as it was with the "ridiculous imposition" of Gaelic. However, it did give the First Minister and local MSP Alasdair Allan an opportunity to showcase their support for the language.

Western Isles MSP Alasdair Allan said he found it "a surprising view", and that the remedy for those who don't speak Gaelic was to take his route, and learn it themselves. The First Minister admitted with another laugh that he "had some distance to travel" with his Gaelic abilities, adding on a more

serious note that "a country which does not protect its history and culture is heading for the sands."

Following the Town Hall meeting, Salmond headed to MG Alba, where after meeting with the cast and crew of new Gaelic drama Bannan (The Ties that Bind), he officially opened the organisation's headquarters in the Creative Industries Media Centre on Seaforth Road.

Maggie Cunningham, Chair of MG Alba – who exchanged banter with the First Minister on whether he would have a role in Bannan – noted that when Radio nan Eilean began in 1979 (then comprising the entirety of the Gaelic media sector) it employed just four people. Now, across MG Alba, BBC Alba, Radio nan Gaidheal and their various partner organisations, there are 120 people employed in the creative industries locally.

It was in this context that Alex Salmond announced a government investment of £2.1 million for BBC Alba to drive forward its programme making, saying he was "delighted to open these new facilities which will be an important boost to the local economy, to the broadcasting industry and to the use of Gaelic both in the Western Isles and throughout Scotland."

Mr Salmond didn't spend all his time in Stornoway giving speeches, but was out and about getting involved in the community. "I enjoyed getting to work the digger at the harbour this morning," he told EVENTS, saying whoever left him in charge of the machinery was "quite adventurous." He had been at the ferry terminal to see the work being done in order to accommodate the arrival of the MV Loch Seaforth, and was due to visit the Iolaire Memorial the following day.

Despite being "up at the crack of dawn", Salmond said he had enjoyed his visit to the island, and seemed more than satisfied with the Town Hall event. "The public meetings I love, I absolutely adore them... The key issue is meetings like this."

There will be many more meetings like the ones in Stornoway before he will find out if they have been successful: the First Minister, like everyone else, will finally have to wait and see how Scotland votes on September 18th.



First Minister, Alex Salmond being interviewed in the Stornoway Ferry Terminal