

SNP PARTY CONFERENCE

There were gasps, jaws dropped, and eyes filled with tears at the moment Alex Salmond announced the Scottish National Party had secured a donation of £500,000 from entrepreneur Brian Souter.

This, together with the endorsement of former Royal Bank of Scotland chairman and chief executive Sir George Mathewson, delivered the kind of publicity that Labour would have been proud of a decade ago. The question is, will it be enough to deliver the SNP into power on May 3?

The SNP gathered in Glasgow for its Spring conference at the weekend and demonstrated its ability to win new support without alienating its core voters and members, even when the two groups' interest do not seem aligned.

The SNP had a sophisticated set of messages to disseminate. It sought to reassure party members of its commitment to independence, yet not overstate this and risk deterring the majority of voters who still do not support this. It spoke of a constructive rather than confrontational relationship between an SNP First Minister and a Labour Prime Minister, yet pledged to demand within 100 days of being elected that North Sea oil revenues be redirected to Scotland. It promised cuts in business rates and corporation tax to attract the business vote, but advocated for business regulation and intervention amid repeated criticisms of big business, shareholders and profits. This balancing act will be a fascinating one to follow.



SNP leader Alex Salmond MP

The big message to the conference hall was on the party's commitment to independence which had been queried in recent weeks. Those inside the hall welcomed an unequivocal pledge to hold a referendum on the subject, but the message to the wider electorate and potential coalition partners was of the SNP's capability and credibility to govern Scotland in order to make the party more acceptable come polling day.

Acceptability is also a hallmark of the SNP's business sector strategy. Just as Labour's "prawn cocktail offensive" of the 1990s sought to win the confidence of the business community, the SNP is reaping the dividends of several years work making contact with and demonstrating its economic credentials to the business leaders of Scotland. This has not achieved universal corporate conversion to the SNP, but it has overcome the previous fear of an SNP administration. In this way, the credibility of Sir George Mathewson's support could be even more valuable than the cash donations of Brian Souter.

Back in the hall, leader Alex Salmond and his deputy Nicola Sturgeon set out their priorities for a first 100 days in office which sought to show the party is about much more than independence. Negotiating control of North Sea oil and gas revenues from Westminster, control of firearms law, legislation on student debt and free prescriptions, a local income tax, climate change controls, cutting back-office government to invest in frontline services, and devolving more powers and funds to community councils are all considered vote-winning policies. They also form a set of bargaining chips for any coalition discussions and it remains to be seen what the SNP would be prepared to concede in order to form a coalition with their most obvious partner the Liberal Democrats, who still oppose an independence referendum.

So do these similarities between the SNP of 2007 and the Labour party of 1997 suggest the former could emulate the latter and enter government? The speeches, strategy and momentum may be there but the electoral arithmetic is daunting. The Scottish Labour party still holds nearly double the number of SNP parliamentary seats, so the SNP needs Labour to lose almost as heavily as it wins. Labour's landslide victory in 1997 gave it an emphatic mandate to govern, but in 2007 the SNP require such a landslide just to get to the coalition negotiating table.