

The Alastair Campbell interview

It's make or break time in Holyrood, and with the referendum now mere months away, the SNP leader talks currency conflict, border wars and Scotland's alcoholic reckoning. Is our 300-year union coming to the end of its Highland fling? GQ's arch interrogator grills a nationalist treasure

Alex SALMOND



FOR YEARS, Alex Salmond toiled away as part of a tiny and largely ignored Scottish National Party group in Westminster. Today, not only is he majority leader in a Scottish Parliament with an electoral system designed to prevent majority rule, he is also the single most powerful force in the campaign to make Scotland an independent country once more. I'm a strong supporter of the Better Together campaign and having once said in Salmond's presence that he "fell in love with himself at first sight and has remained entirely faithful ever since" I half expected the Scottish first minister to reject my request for an

interview. Instead, he quickly said yes, and so, on the morning Tony Benn died, I flew to Aberdeen.

I took with me plenty of advice. My mother told me to tell him he was a menace and that she was worried about Scotland leaving the UK. Sir Alex Ferguson suggested I "give him laldy" (in other words, give him hell). Alistair Darling warned me, "Watch out. He's been having charm lessons." There was plenty of that, plenty of time – we had two hours, and another two for lunch – and plenty of

confidence. The polls have consistently said he cannot win. He ripostes that he was consistently behind in the polls before he won a majority at Holyrood. His opponents say Salmond, 59, has failed to answer big questions about an independent Scotland's currency and membership of the EU and Nato. He admits there are unknowns as well as knowns ahead, but believes Scots are ready to seize "the opportunity of a lifetime". But if the polls, and a lot of the arguments, are stacked against him, he does not sound like a man setting expectations for defeat. My mum was not happy when I reported back to base. ➤

PHOTOGRAPH BY **NADAV KANDER**

ALASTAIR CAMPBELL

Holyrood awakening:
The Scottish first minister,
photographed for British
GQ on 5 March 2014, has
pinned the hopes and fears
of a nation on September's
independence referendum

AC: I am not asking you to imagine your death, but do you feel you are a historic figure?

AS: I prefer modern studies to history.

AC: But if you pull this off...

AS: When I became an MP, we had three SNP MPs. I was confident things could change and the progress has been satisfactory. I think Scotland should be independent and that is what I am driven by.

AC: How big a sense do you have that you are doing something huge?

AS: Not just me, but the country. I think this is the greatest opportunity for Scotland in generations.

AC: What will turnout be?

AS: Big. Pushing mid seventies, maybe higher, and that is good for us.

AC: Like any campaign, you have people decided for you, people decided against, and you are chasing the people in the middle. How much are you trying to say both that everything will change and nothing will change, and is that not your strategic conundrum?

AS: Any proposition will seek to minimise fear and risk, focus on things which are positive and empowering. Many of the Better Together claims are unreasonable – “Project Fear” – some are more arguable. Our task is to dismiss the unreasonable and argue more powerfully for the others.

AC: On the currency, you cannot guarantee you will keep the pound.

AS: We can put it forward as the overwhelming likelihood and explain reasons why. It is the best outcome for us and for the rest of the UK.

AC: You said that the pound was a millstone around our necks. When did you change your mind?

AS: When Norman Lamont came out to announce interest rates had gone to 12 per cent then 15 an hour later, I am certain Labour would have been saying the same [as me] at the time.

AC: You were very pro euro before.

AS: Well...

AC: So Gordon was right.

AS: Or Tony was wrong. Currency unions can work. I do not disagree with Mark Carney about the arrangements. It can work if it works in the interests of both parties. I am not against the euro, I am against these people saying currency unions can't work, like Danny Alexander, who was an organiser of the euro campaign. What has changed since he did the euro campaign? You could say the euro hasn't worked but you can't say that currency unions per se can't work. Carney and the fiscal



commission are clear about the criteria that have to be met. I am amused at the suggestion there is no plan B. We have plan B, C, D, E and F. I have never said this is a matter where the rest of the UK has no say, but it is not for George Osborne to say what happens – he does not own sterling.

AC: Could you envisage your own currency, starting out fresh?

AS: It is laid out in the report; other options are credible.

AC: Does that scare you?

AS: If it does not scare the fiscal commission why should it scare me? I was meant to be in favour of sterlingisation as a short-term thing as opposed to medium term. Saying you're not having a union is not the same as saying you're banned from using the pound. You cannot ban it.

AC: So it will be like Belgium and Luxembourg, with the Belgian franc in drag?

AS: Benelux was a successful monetary union for 70 years. Luxembourg had the Monetary Institute, and during that time became very prosperous.

AC: A lot of tax dodging.

AS: There is tax dodging in the UK.

AC: Are you embarrassed that your most prominent celeb supporter is a tax exile?

AS: Sean [Connery] does not recognise that description. If you

Rebel with a cause: Alex Salmond, pictured here after he was suspended from the House of Commons for interrupting the 1988 Budget speech

are an international artist, you are likely to pay tax where you live and work. He has paid more tax than you and I multiplied many times. There are films made in Scotland because he would only make them here.

AC: You would rather he lived here.

AS: I would love that, but I understand why he doesn't.

AC: And you understand why Andy Murray is keeping his counsel?

AS: I understand why anyone does. He was referring to the time he made a joke about the England football team and never heard the end of it.

AC: Who do you want to win the World Cup?

AS: The best side. I hope England do well. I support Scotland and good football.

AC: On Osborne, even if he is unpopular, do you not think he was right to come up and make the argument that he and David Cameron should be more involved?

AS: I have no complaints about them being part of the debate, but if you are you should be all in. You can't just deliver a sermon and nip away again.

AC: Say something positive about Cameron.

AS: I thought in the first year, in tricky circumstances, he looked like a prime minister, helped by his background and his natural assumption of being born to rule. He established authority well. Since then he's been blown off course.

AC: Say something nice about Osborne.

AS: Much trickier. [Long pause.]

AC: “Salmond Lost For Words Shock.” Do you not think he is cleverer than Cameron?

AS: OK, yes, cleverer than Cameron; damned by faint praise. I've only been to his office at the Treasury once. He had a picture of himself, Hague and Cameron, like three musketeers. He wanted to show it to me. You and I would have a picture of something personal. People like you, people like me, we are abnormal because we spend a lot of our time in politics. But most of us have other aspects to our life which are more human. Maybe I am doing him a grave disservice, but I found that picture odd.

AC: If you had been Tony, what would you have done with Gordon?

AS: Probably what you advised him to. All of us have been in positions where what you would like to do and what you can do are different things. Most of my experience says it is better to do it than not do it.

AC: What do you think my advice was?

AS: At some stage, bring matters to a head. That was your advice, I'm sure.

AC: You don't have a reputation as a team player.

AS: Then the reputation is ill-founded. You cannot assemble a good team without being a team player. Things have got better since people stopped being able to say I am a one-man band. Nobody says it any more.

AC: Which criticisms made of you are fair and which get to you?

AS: The only ones that matter are the ones that are fair. All of us go through stages where we think it is important what people say. But the only thing that matters is being able to explain yourself. My saving grace has always been TV because people can get to know you.

AC: You get a good press up here. They're eating out of your hand.

AS: Which press do you read? There is a great Burns quote, though: "The mair they talk, I'm kent the better."

AC: Was Shakespeare not the greatest ever Briton?

AS: Well, given he was alive before the Union you have to accord him to England. I don't want to deprive England of their greatest son.

AC: So he was the greatest ever Englishman?

AS: Yes. And one of the best things about England and Scotland is that their greatest people, Shakespeare and Burns, were poets as opposed to politicians or generals or whatever.

AC: So not Churchill?

AS: Well, he would be up there.

AC: So come on, greatest Briton.

AS: Oh, let's have a woman. What about Boudica?

AC: Let's have someone *GQ* readers know about.

AS: Oh, I'm sure there is a men's fashion range called Boudica.

AC: Do you share my worry that non-democracies have advantages over democracies these days?

AS: I do think there should be much more responsibility for democratic decision making.

AC: Politicians should be trusted more to get on with it?

AS: Yes. And if they don't get it right they get kicked out. If strong vested interests can use legal power to block and tackle, that becomes a problem.

AC: As with your plans for minimum unit pricing (MUP)?

AS: Yes. We are in court with the Scotch Whisky Association. They do fine work but they're deeply wrong

on MUP. We are also in court against tobacco companies on packaging.

People have the right to go to court but there has to be some means of a time frame, otherwise the clock ticks down on the democratic process.

AC: Why do you think Cameron caved in?

AS: I would imagine [Cameron's strategist] Lynton Crosby said to him only three things matter. Keep Scotland, crush UKIP, win the election: don't fight on other fronts.

AC: How worried are you about Scotland's relationship with alcohol?

AS: Significantly. Look at the graphs since 1960. Europe, fairly steady. England, consumption up a lot. Scotland, up a lot more.

AC: Why?

AS: General reasons and particular reasons. The general reason is the availability of cheap alcohol and the cultural changes that has introduced. When we were young, we would go out for a drink; people now go out drunk, having drunk cheap booze before. That is social change for the worse. Then there is something deep about Scotland's relationship with alcohol that is about self-image – lack of confidence, maybe, as a nation – and we have to do something about it.

AC: Would you get rid of alcohol in sports sponsorship?

AS: There is a good argument for that. Also other moves are showing good signs – packaging, education. But the overwhelming impact is price, a flooding of access to cheap booze. The impact and the cost is extraordinary.

AC: How did you feel when Jeremy Hunt said they would wait to see how MUP worked in Scotland?

AS: Half of me was flattered he sees us in a leadership role; the other half says, "Live up to your own responsibilities."

AC: So the state has to act on this.

AS: I promote whisky. I do it on the argument that it's a quality drink, has a worldwide cachet and that its recent great success in markets like China is about social emulation and authenticity, not cheapness. My argument is that if you are promoting it as authentic and of great worth, you cannot promote it from a nation of drunks. You'll never be able to say it is healthy and life giving, but you can say it's authentic and high quality. Actually, I do not believe the Whisky Association's motivation is about whisky, it is about cheap vodka. They say not, but I do not find their arguments convincing.

AC: Now, Europe. You can't guarantee you'll keep the pound, and you can't guarantee EU membership either.

AS: I would say Europe is an even better bet.

AC: But you have had José Manuel Barroso [president of the European Commission], Herman Van Rompuy [president of the European Council], the Spanish...

AS: Barroso has been attacked by a lot of senior voices, saying he went too far. I think on the pound and on Europe the sermons from on high are having little effect. With Osborne, his tone, manner and content are resented. Barroso was not resented, just not credible. There are no sensible reasons for having Scotland out of the EU.

AC: What of the Spanish prime minister?

AS: The Spanish foreign minister said if there is agreed consent, Spain will have nothing to say.

AC: You got into a terrible muddle on the TV when you said you had legal advice on the EU, but actually you didn't.

AS: I was investigated by a [former] permanent secretary and cleared. I said "according to the documents". Read the whole context, Alastair; I was talking about the proofing of the legal officers. I went on to say you can't discuss legal advice.

AC: But the impression you gave was false. You could have published it. You wanted the Iraq legal advice published.

AS: I think there is a difference between taking people to a war that many considered illegal, Alastair. We are not declaring UDI [unilateral declaration of independence]. The ➤

Dressed to kilt: Salmond drums up support in New York at a Friends of Scotland benefit show, 3 April 2006



'There is something deep about Scotland's relationship with alcohol that is about our self-image – our lack of confidence as a nation'

➤ correct point for the legal advice was the Edinburgh Agreement. Once we sought the legal advice we published a document conversant with it and it has not been sexed up.

AC: Is Tony Blair a war criminal?

AS: I think the war was illegal in the senses in which [tails off]... Does that make him a war criminal? Not necessarily.

AC: Why not? If it is an illegal war, surely the people who waged it are war criminals.

AS: A court could spend a long time judging personal liability.

AC: But if you say it was illegal surely that means you think they are war criminals.

AS: I am drawing a distinction. I have said a number of things about your old boss that you and he would not like, but I don't think he is a war criminal. These are matters for courts.

AC: You say it was illegal.

AS: Yes.

AC: That makes him a war criminal.

AS: If you say so.

AC: No, I want to hear you say so, because the words are important.

AS: It would have to be established by a court, or certainly a higher power than the House of Commons.

AC: You said Kosovo was an act of unpardonable folly. Do you stand by that?

AS: Yes, I do. I think you called me a "silly boy". The key to Kosovo was twofold. One, it did not have the assent of the UN Security Council and that process would be used in other conflicts. That is the part that strikes me as unpardonable. The folly was the bombing. I was not, as I was pounced upon [for], saying there was a comparison with the blitz – I was saying what happens to people under bombardment. What brought Milosevic to heel was the ground invasion.

AC: On Syria, do you not think that when the leader of the free world says there is a red line, and when it's crossed nothing happens, there is a problem of world leadership?

AS: There may be a problem with world leadership, but military action in Syria was not the answer. I supported action in Afghanistan because there was clear breach of law [and] international assent – not a coalition of the willing but a coalition of everyone. Whether it was a fantastic idea after two years to divert attention to Iraq is another matter.

AC: Which world leader do you most admire?

'I'm on the 5:2 diet. Don't tell me you didn't notice. I want to be 14 stone for the campaign'

AS: I think the German chancellor is pretty effective. Some chancellors have been unwilling to use German authority. She is not in that mould.

AC: Obama?

AS: I am a great admirer of his campaigns. But I don't understand how he hasn't... Even when you have a frozen Congress, you would think you could do more. I am not saying it is the same as running the Scottish government...

AC: You are far more powerful.

AS: But there is the point [to be made] about running a minority government when you cannot get legislation through. There are still ways to carry forward policy if you prioritise it in a proper democratic way.

AC: Putin?

AS: Well, I don't approve of a range of Russian actions, but he is more effective than most and you can see why he carries support in Russia.

AC: Admire him?

AS: Certain aspects. He's restored a substantial part of Russian pride and that must be a good thing. There are aspects of Russian constitutionality and the inter-mesh with business and politics that are difficult to admire.

AC: Would you feel any guilt if we lost permanent membership of the Security Council because of losing Scotland?

AS: I am ready and willing to support the UK in keeping its role there.

AC: But it will make the UK a very different country, less powerful.

AS: It loses eight per cent of its population.

AC: Are you not fighting this campaign as a Scottish nationalist, a British unionist and a European federalist? Basically you are a republican.

AS: I am not.

AC: You've been a republican.

AS: I honestly haven't. I was in the 79 Group [an early SNP faction], which had republicanism on the agenda, but if you read the minutes I spent a lot of time saying it was a bad idea and let's concentrate on the socialism.

AC: Do you like the Queen?

AS: Yes.

AC: Do you like Prince Charles?

AS: Yes.

AC: Does he write to you?

AS: Often.

AC: Do you think the letters should be published under freedom of information?

AS: Depends on the letters.

AC: Does he mainly write about landowning and hunting issues?

AS: No. Much more about agriculture, the environment, sustainable fishing, architecture, things he has been more right on than wrong. One of the first things I did as first minister was approve a capital grant to a project on Dumfries House that the Duke of Rothesay [Prince Charles], as I call him, was taking on, which was a project he was pursuing against lots of advice [and that] is now a success.

AC: What about all these mega-rich English, Norwegians and Qataris buying up huge slabs of the Highlands?

AS: Do you want to go through them one by one?

AC: Paul Dacre. Can you not stop him at the border?

AS: I've only spoken to him once in my life, tried to get their support in a by-election, and found Gordon [Brown] had got there first.

AC: What about [Rupert] Murdoch? Shall we both admit we got too close? All those invites you made...

AS: I invite every global Scot to the Ryder Cup. I probably invited you.

AC: You never invited me to anything.

AS: I invited Rupert...

AC: Rupert?

AS: ...and he couldn't come.

AC: Do you like him?

AS: I do. He is a remarkable man. What is wrong with this relationship? Why shouldn't politicians engage with people in the media? I am unsure where this is taking you, my boy.

AC: I think we did get too close.

AS: Relations with media are an inevitable part of discourse. The test is do you administer policy without fear or favour. And I do.

AC: Who is your hero?

AS: I think for 90 per cent of our generation it has to be Mandela.

AC: When you're lying in the bath do you think about what your new national anthem will be?

AS: No. I have showers.

AC: I have never had a great thought in the shower.

AS: I read a theory that the decline of

key decision making in America was caused by the decline of the bath. Nobody ever thinks in the shower.

AC: So what will the anthem be?

AS: Scotland has an anthem and it has been a remarkable change. At previous Commonwealth Games the Scottish anthem was "Scotland The Brave". The athletes have voted for "Flower Of Scotland".

AC: But new country, new anthem, surely.

AS: The people will get a choice.

AC: Some kind of contest?

AS: Yes.

AC: Did you feel British at the Olympics?

AS: I thought the opening thing was great. It was an imagined thing, of course, and there was an irony in the NHS part, but I took out of it that an opening ceremony must have a theme.

AC: How Scottish will the Commonwealth Games be?

AS: The most important thing for a country is how useful it is to the rest of the world, not how great you are but what contribution you can make. I thought the "Great Britain" campaign very bad for that reason.

AC: Do you respect Nigel Farage?

AS: He has a certain bonhomie but it is not enough. He is having influence beyond his significance so you have to admire that. There is a constituency for saloon-bar politics and he has played it out. I have a sneaking regard for anyone who takes on powerful establishments.

AC: Nukes?

AS: Don't like them.

AC: Will they exist in an independent Scotland?

AS: Not after a safe period for their removal.

AC: Will they be allowed to sail through Scottish waters?

AS: We'll have the same policy as Norway and Canada.

AC: Don't ask, don't tell – so not nuclear free then?

AS: The issue is are weapons to be based here and the answer is no. Do not underestimate our determination on that.

AC: Nato?

AS: In favour. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization without a large section of the North Atlantic would be unusual.

AC: Would there be a different diplomatic tone towards the US?

AS: The US will be a close friend and ally. The best analogy is Ireland. The thing is that we, you, us...

AC: I'm not a "proper Scot".

AS: Yes you are.

AC: Why haven't I got a vote then? Why hasn't Alex Ferguson?

AS: I would love to have extended the franchise. But our politics is based on participation not ethnicity. Sean Connery made the point, "I am an expat. I should not have the right to vote, but I can have an opinion." That's the fair way.

AC: But this is such a big thing for the UK and there was not even an argument about who should vote.

AS: The UK government agreed with the franchise. [Ex-Scottish secretary] Michael Moore agreed with it.

AC: Exactly. Ridiculous. Did you bollock Nicola Sturgeon [deputy first minister] when she said she didn't want people putting money in the UK Treasury?

AS: Bollocking is not suitable for a female politician and certainly not for Nicola. She didn't say that.

AC: What film did you last watch?

AS: Not been to the cinema much but I've watched all of *House Of Cards*.

AC: Did you learn anything?

AS: That Kevin Spacey is a great actor.

AC: We knew that. Did you learn anything for your job? Deals? Dealing with people?

AS: Yes, maybe. That was the best bit. It was far-fetched throwing the journalist in front of the train, though.

AC: Favourite song?

AS: Burns. "Ae Fond Kiss".

AC: You sure you're not just saying that because you have a campaign on?

AS: No. It is the best song. Bob Dylan cited it as a key poetic inspiration.

AC: Can you get Dylan to the Games' opening ceremony?

Tartan army:
UK prime minister David Cameron joins the Scottish first minister for the Armed Forces Day parade in Edinburgh, 25 June 2011



AS: I can ask.

AC: Does your wife enjoy the life?

AS: Like most political spouses she has great sufferance. I think in many ways being in office is easier because you have more support.

AC: We don't see her much.

AS: That is Moira's choice. She does a lot in the constituency.

AC: How do you see the job changing if you win?

AS: There are substantial changes for the country and it will unleash a huge opportunity for Scotland. But the position of the parliament will change less than you think. It would have been momentous if you had gone from a standing start to independence, but the Parliament is there and has major day-to-day impact. Once the date with destiny comes, if we win, the agreement kicks in. Before that, people even more nefarious than you have a vested interest in saying how it will never work. But the day after, it is in everyone's interest to make it work.

AC: Favourite food?

AS: It was lamb curry, but I am on this 5:2 diet.

AC: Really?

AS: Don't tell me you didn't notice.

AC: Two days without energy in a campaign is bad.

AS: I want to be down to 14 stone for the campaign. I was 17, now I'm 15.

AC: Favourite place in Scotland?

AS: Colonsay.

AC: Rest of the world?

AS: California, especially San Francisco.

AC: Best and worst quality in yourself and in others?

AS: In myself, best is loyalty, worst is impatience. Or letting it show. In others, I like generosity of spirit. Worst quality is prejudice.

AC: How often do you say, "I am right and you're wrong"?

AS: Hardly ever.

AC: I bet you do. Same-sex marriages?

AS: In favour. We should have the first one next autumn.

AC: How depressed are you about Scottish football?

AS: [Gordon] Strachan is a good manager. In the SPL, we are getting more Scottish players coming through.

AC: Do you not think one day Celtic and Rangers must be in the Premier League?

AS: Possibly, but it would be a pity... Do you want a signed copy of the White Paper?

AC: Yes, I would love one. Can I put it on eBay? 