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Michael Ancram Esq MP
Chairman
Scottish Conservative Party
11 Atholl Crescent
Edinburgh EH3 8HG

25th August 1981

I am writing on the Prime Minister's behalf to thank you very much for your letter of 19th August, addressed to her, with which you enclosed a copy of a letter of the same date, which you had sent to Peter Thorneycroft.

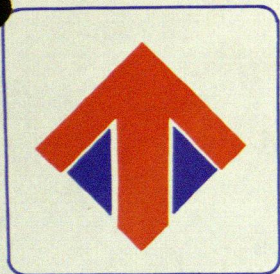
I will show your letter and its enclosure to the Prime Minister on her return to London tomorrow.

Please give me a ring when you are next in London.

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PERSONAL

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Chairman: Michael Ancram MA LL.B MP

Director: Graham Macmillan

Scottish Conservative Party

Headquarters: 11 Atholl Crescent, Edinburgh EH3 8HG. Telephone: 031-229 1342

19th August, 1981

Rt. Hon Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, M.P.
10 Downing Street,
London S.W.1.

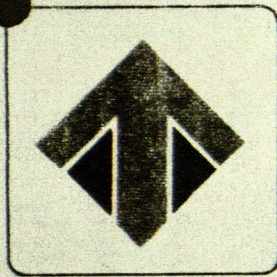
Dear Prime-Minister,

I enclose for your information a copy of a memorandum I have written for Peter Thorneycroft following a discussion I had with him before the recess and I enclose also a copy of my covering letter to him. I hope that this may be of some use or interest, as I do feel that some of the mistakes we made up here in the early 70's were avoidable in retrospect had we been more aware of what was happening at the time.

*Yours sincerely
Michael*

Chairman: Michael Ancram MA LL.B MP

Director: Graham Macmillan



Scottish Conservative Party

Headquarters: 11 Atholl Crescent, Edinburgh EH3 8HG. Telephone: 031-229 1342

19th August, 1981

Rt. Hon. Lord . Thorneycroft,
Conservative Central Office,
32 Smith Square,
London S.W.1.

Dear Peter,

As promised before the recess I enclose a short memorandum on some of the applicable comparisons between the current growth of the SDP and the original growth of the SNP in Scotland between 1970 and 1974. Obviously exact comparisons are neither possible nor safe but I feel that some of the lessons we learnt in that period are useful. You will see that I have not tried to provide answers but merely to put up some warning signs. The answers will of course depend on exsisting political circumstances.

I feel that the most important aspect of comparison is in the grass roots growth of both parties which is often the least easy to assess and the most difficult to respond to. It took some time in Scotland to begin to respond sufficiently at this level and in the end (75/79) was made easier by having in the field candidates who were aware of the problem and were able to react locally.

I hope that this is of some use.

*Yours sincerely
Michael*

Introduction

While it is always dangerous in politics to draw historical comparisons and to try to apply them exactly, I have watched with some concern the similarity in the growth of the SDP and the similar growth of the SNP in Scotland in the early 1970's.

It is essential first to deal with the two obvious differences. Firstly the 'independence' element of the SNP and secondly the 'oil' argument, both of which were in a sense interlinked the one giving an element of credence to the other. I discard these elements as being fatal to the comparison for the following reason. The independence/oil element in the growth of SNP support was always calculable, was never at that stage the major part of their attraction, and was positively not the reason for many of those who joined them from other parties. It can be quantified, analysed and put aside for the purposes of this comparison.

I would add also that in terms of the periods of comparison devolution was not an issue nor a cause of the SNP rise. It was a reaction to it after it had occurred.

The point therefore of this brief memorandum is to set out the similarities, to pin point the dangers and to expose the mistakes we made in our reactions to the SNP rise which may be of some use in assessing what our reaction should be to the SDP today.

1. Similarities

1.1. Something New in the Arena at a time of Economic hardship: the growth of the SNP sprung very much from the effects of economic recession and hardship in Scotland in 1971/72. Its newness gave it a special relevance at a time when people, disillusioned still with the previous Labour Government's performance, were seeking desperately for some life-line of hope to lift them out of what they perceived to be a deepening morass of despair, increasing unemployment and industrial recession. Its very lack of policies and its fresh uncluttered approach attracted many people to begin looking at it with a serious view to supporting it.

1.2. Something New at a time of Labour squabbles; - there was a strong feeling that Labour divisions and a patent leftward movement undermined their credibility as a natural haven for the disillusioned or doubtful midterm elector. The SNP provided a new alternative to Conservative allegiance with enough of a left image to give it the appearance of a broad and therefore relatively stable base.

1.3. Something New at a time of political disillusion: The major recollection I have as a candidate during this period was the resentment of the electorate at the two party slanging match. The SNP offered what seemed to be an escape from that in a way which the Liberal Party had never achieved, and it presented sufficient faces of people known to have left or right allegiances in the past now working together for a joint cause to enhance that credibility.

1.4. By-election Success: Warrington did not so much remind me of transient liberal by-election victories based on protest as a positive vote such as that witnessed in the SNP victory in Govan (of all Labour Strongholds) in 1973. The protest vote is one which is used between elections. Those who switched SNP before the 1974 election continued their new found allegiance through that General Election and the one soon thereafter, if not beyond that.

1.5. The type of New Supporter; - not the idealistic liberal, but the quiet respectable middle class, middle management or middle professional who regard themselves as thinking electors. Early inroads were thus made among opinion formers - the local doctor, minister, solicitor, banker etc. who gave added credibility when the electoral band-wagon began to roll.

1.6. The Image of Safety:- particularly at a time of extreme opposition this was a safe alternative to what was perceived to be a damaging Government. Despite improvement in the latter image the initial change held through a general election.

2. Dangers

2.1. The Economic Scenario:- again one of recession, rising unemployment and industrial difficulty. The danger as perceived from the SNP in the 1970's is that they did not initially make much headway among those immediately affected who by and large retained their original allegiances. The inroad was made among those who felt a conscience at what they saw happening and who believed that by transferring their allegiance they could assuage that conscience without compromising their principles. They were in large part our supporters.

2.2. The Credibility Factor:- because of the newness and thus the media interest at a relatively intellectual level the SNP, unlike the liberals, began to be seen as a potential political force which could achieve things. Added to this the well publicised recruitment of respected persons, the spirit of reliability and promise overcame their Achilles heel of Independence and allowed people to join them who would have run a mile at their pasts and at their basic intentions and philosophy.

2.3. The Centrist image:- the disillusioned elector flees from what he sees as the reason for his disillusion and seeks what he believes is a peaceful haven. That it be a vacuum, or a nationalist group ceases to matter if it gives him that feeling of potential political tranquility, the end to the dogfight. The SNP purveyed that image very successfully. By encouraging attacks from both left and right they enhanced it. By the election they had stolen much of the middle ground.

2.4. The Election:- Because we were the Government they hit our vote and our seats far harder than they hit Labour's. They created a bandwagon of success which they maintained and strengthened throughout the campaign giving an increased credibility which even in the last days of the campaign was actively and tangibly in my own experience gaining them votes from our supporters.

2.5. Tactical Voting:- well known at by-elections they used their left/right interchangeable image at the General Election to manoeuvre votes to them. Thus in seats where we were second to Labour (in some cases quite

(quite close) but had not won the seat for some time they actually had our supporters switching to them for tactical reasons and succeeded in knocking our overall vote to the lowest on record. This use of the tactical vote on such a large scale during a General Election took us all by surprise, particularly my predecessor as chairman at the time.

3. Our Mistakes

3.1. The Leftwing Challenge:- From an early date we tried to pin on them the charge of being a leftwing party, helped by the few policy statements they made and the known political views of some of their better known personalities. I have no doubt that this backfired on us because quite simply it was not believed. The fact that the Labour Party was counter-charging them in the end gave them an enhanced credibility as a centrist party above the dogfight. People wanted to believe they were neither left nor right and the SNP played that game - an easy one to play when people are more receptive to the present than to the past. I know from direct experience that our attack in some ways dented our own credibility among the sort of people who had or who were likely to defect.

3.2. The Mocking Challenge:- we also at that time attempted to label the SNP as some sort of irrelevant political freak. Extremists offering nothing concrete, motivated by ambition for personal success, selling dreams and easy answers, appealing to the instinctive rather than rational side of the electorates character. All true, but as a form of attack unsuccessful. There are none so blind In retrospect our mistake was the directness of our attack, building them up, confirming the media view of them as a potent political force, creating the image of the **boy** David up against the two Goliaths. Again at a time of disillusionment with ourselves our attacks if anything added to their credibility.

3.3. The Centralised Attack:- much of our attack emanated from the centre, reacting to media stories and evident successes. As a result it was heavy-handed in the circumstances, inconsistent as it relied on reaction to events and again counter-productive. The real error was however not to realise that the growth centre of the SNP was not so much in the media and in the centre of the political arena but at grass roots level. We failed to attack at community or branch level where from nowhere the SNP was building up a cell structure which became a branch structure based on genuine popular support, which turned into an effective constituency fighting and fund-raising machine by the time of the General Election.

3.4. The Belief in the two Party System:- we did not believe that at General election time this system would be genuinely challenged. We were therefore not prepared for the advent of the tactical vote in our safest seats - Labour votes obliterated. We had no plans or tactics for strengthening and encouraging (as in 1979) however tacitly the position of the main opposition party. We identified and fired at the wrong enemy.

3.5. Ignoring the Centre Ground:- because of misidentification of the real enemy, and because our perceived enemy was of an extreme (relative however to now) disposition, we did not concentrate sufficiently on the middle ground. The results in Scotland were that we abandoned it quite unnecessarily and unjustifiably to the SNP. In England we almost did so to the liberals but they were tainted in a way that the SNP were not. In retrospect the calibre of person we allowed to drift from us to the SNP was a force against which in many ways we are still battling.

Conclusion

It is not the purpose, for it would be presumptuous, of this memorandum to suggest answers. The purpose is to suggest a comparison of circumstances, movements and reactions from which lessons can be drawn.

In many ways the SNP eventually overran themselves but not until after two highly damaging General Elections where this party of the left effectively hit us much harder than Labour. We did however learn lessons of how to set traps between 1974-79. We learnt for a start that if you stand in front of a rolling bandwagon and shout against it you get run down; but if you can get ahead of it on the road and dig a few ditches and holes it will with any luck drive itself into them. We learnt from the experiences of defeat. With the SLP we can pre-empt that from the foregoing examples.