

Donald Stewart

Donald Stewart famously described the Scottish National Party as ‘a radical party with a revolutionary aim’. He himself could not be described as a radical, with his time as leader of the Parliamentary Party and as Party President characterised by his calm, laid-back, undramatic approach, always charming and courteous, but all the while unflinching in his beliefs and his commitment to both Scottish independence and his constituency of the Western Isles. Although his political stance was revolutionary, he did not look, act or talk like a revolutionary, and he was quick to emphasise that the SNP had always opposed any road other than the democratic one.¹

Donald Stewart was born on October 17th 1920 in Stornoway, a place he claimed was ‘a grand place for boys to grow up in’². The son of a ships engineer, he was educated at the local secondary school, the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway, leaving at the age of 16 to take a job as a junior clerk in a local solicitor’s office. Aware that his parents could not afford to send him to university, he was keen to leave school as soon as possible and begin earning. He did acknowledge later that, ‘looking back, I would rather have had a university education than not, but –as the Gaelic expresses it- “it wasn’t put out for me” so I have never wasted any time bemoaning the lack of it.’³ Despite the lack of university education, as Winnie Ewing his fellow MP noted, he was ‘largely self-educated and read voraciously’ becoming a ‘fountain of knowledge’ who ‘had enormous charm and enormous recall-he never forgot anything or anybody’⁴. As she describes, he was ‘extremely well read [] - he could summon up at any time the right quotation from poets, playwrights and all manner of writers, thinkers and politicians from many countries and could recall an apt joke for every occasion.’⁵

From his first job in a solicitor’s office, he went on to work for Kenneth Mackenzie Limited, a leading Harris Tweed manufacturer, in their office. Two years later with the start of the Second World War, he was called up to the Royal Navy, opting for the signals branch where he spent five years, serving on HMS Celandine, a lower class Corvette escorting Atlantic Convoys. After the war, he returned to the Harris Tweed industry, re-joining his old company, where he remained until his election to Parliament 25 years later, by which time he had become a director of the company.

He got his first taste of political life becoming a councillor in what was the Stornoway Town Council in 1951, in which he served for almost 20 years. He served as elected Provost of Stornoway from 1959 until 1965 and again from 1968 until his election to Parliament in 1970. His time in local government, as a Councillor, Provost, a magistrate and Honorary Sheriff, and also a board member of the Stornoway Trust Estate, not only afforded him political experience and a strong local profile but also gave him a keen awareness of the issues facing the Western Isles electorate. As he says in his own modest way: ‘I went to the House of Commons fairly conversant with the main concerns of my constituency...I was armed in some part to do battle on behalf of my electorate, and although realising that I was entering new terrain, I felt that I would not be entirely defenceless on some vital issues.’⁶

¹Obituary: Donald Stewart’, *The Times*, London. Monday August 24th 1992, 13, issue 64419

² Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 11

³ *Ibid.*, 11

⁴ Winnie Ewing, *Stop the World: The Autobiography of Winnie Ewing*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2004), 124

⁵ *Ibid.*, 154

⁶ Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 12-13

As Stewart describes in his memoirs, his support for independence and his dedication to a national movement to advance this was also a product of his early years in the Western Isles. From hearing of the struggles of Wallace and Bruce in his school days, he became convinced of the case for an independent Scotland during the General Election in 1935 when Sir Alexander MacEwen fought the Western Isles in the Nationalist cause. His involvement with the Scottish National Party began shortly after this, at the early age of 16, when in 1936 he wrote to the SNP Headquarters in Glasgow expressing his wish to join the ranks and asking for details of the party's aims and policies. As he noted himself, 'in those days to meet another nationalist was almost as unusual as the Livingstone/Stanley encounter in Africa'.⁷

At the same time, he also became a convert to socialism and thinking he could 'achieve two ends in one-a Socialist Scotland- by joining the Labour party' he did so in 1937. This was short-lived, with him leaving only two years later having become disillusioned with the lack of conviction of the leadership and his distaste for the influence of the union bosses⁸. During his time in the Navy, he regained his interest in the Nationalist cause, then becoming a member of the SNP, regularly reading their pamphlets and the Party paper, and becoming inspired by the orations of fellow nationalists Oliver Brown and Douglas Young. When Dr Robert McIntyre won the Motherwell by-election for the SNP in 1945, he said he could 'still recall his feelings. Here at last was the dawn of a new day for our country. The nation was poised for independence once the war ended. Alas, it was to take another twenty years before a similar victory was achieved.'⁹

It was Donald Stewart himself who achieved one of the next striking victories for the SNP. Following the success of Winnie Ewing at the Hamilton by-election in 1967, the nationalists had hoped to build on this in the general election of June 1970. The party fielded a record number of 65 candidates in the 71 Scottish constituencies and 42 of them lost their deposit. In a bigger blow, Labour regained Hamilton with an 8582 majority.¹⁰ As Winnie Ewing herself describes it, it was 'a bitter blow. As the night went on it seemed as if we would once again go back to having no voice at Westminster. But then something wonderful happened.'¹¹

Donald Stewart had been campaigning as the SNP candidate for the Western Isles, against the sitting Labour MP, Malcolm K Macmillan who had held the seat for the previous 35 years. Stewart felt that they had campaigned in a strong challenge to Labour and were confident of a good showing, although he claimed that 'only the most optimistic entertained the possibility that we could beat Malcolm Macmillan'.¹² Fellow campaigners remember how Stewart insisted on being driven to every small village in the islands. They recall him arguing for his cause using the case of the Torrey Canyon, the ship which had run aground off the south coast of England in 1967, telling voters, 'if the Torrey Canyon had run ashore on the Outer Hebrides, the British government wouldn't have given us one bottle of Parazon to clean it up.'¹³ His approachable nature and personal standing in the community, along with increasing disenchantment with the sitting MP's perceived absence from the

⁷ Ibid., 14

⁸ Ibid., 16

⁹ Ibid., 18

¹⁰ Richard Sharpe, 'Nationalists gain seat', *The Times*: London, Saturday June 20, 1970, page 2, Issue 5789

¹¹ Winnie Ewing, *Stop the World: The Autobiography of Winnie Ewing*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2004) 120

¹² Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 9

¹³ Interview, Rae and Nellie Mackenzie, 8th February 2016

constituency combined to contribute to his success and he drew votes from both traditional Labour and Conservative supporters. As Brian Wilson, former Labour MP and one-time electoral opponent of Donald Stewart in the Western Isles, noted, 'having cut a popular figure in local government, as Provost of Stornoway...Donald was uniquely qualified to take advantage of a mood for change.'¹⁴

Due to the geographical spread of the Western Isles, at that time it was necessary to collect the ballot boxes by boat and so the result was announced almost 24 hours behind the rest of the UK. As *The Times* reported it, 'The SNP sprang the biggest surprise of the general election in Scotland late tonight by winning the Western Isles seat held by Labour for the past 35 years. Mr Donald Stewart, aged 49, Provost of Stornoway, Lewis and a leading opponent in Scotland of British standard time, converted a Labour majority of 5733 in the 1966 election into a Nationalist majority of 726. Mr William Wolfe, chairman of the SNP, said tonight, 'we are absolutely elated. We could have no better member for the SNP in parliament than Donnie Stewart. We have lost one seat and we have won one. We are delighted that we have someone in parliament who knows many of the real problems of Scotland and we can build on this.'¹⁵

The result brought joy to the SNP ranks after a poor showing. A number of leading members of the party had gathered that day in Ewing's house, in a depressed mood, but Stewart describes how on telling the Party's Chairman, Billy Wolfe, 'I'm in, he 'could hear the room erupt in hysterical delight.'¹⁶ As Ewing recounts, 'he said in his usual witty style: 'I've toppled him over, the load from the Isles.'¹⁷ On taking calls from all over Scotland and beyond that evening, Stewart felt that 'it was clear that our win had revived the party's spirits and hopes.'¹⁸ It was the first time that the Party had won a seat at a General Election and Donald Stewart himself claimed that 'it ended the taunts that the SNP could make a showing at by-elections but that faced with forming a government, the public would revert to the established parties.'¹⁹

As the sole SNP representative at Westminster, Donald Stewart had a tough role to get to grips with during his first term in office. He was helped to settle in by Winnie Ewing, who herself had previously been the sole elected member for the Party and who he considered a 'faithful friend'²⁰. He went on to form good relationships across party boundaries and he spoke fondly of the many 'characters' and 'odd-balls' on all sides of the Commons particularly in the 1970s. He had the combination of gravitas and a great wit and developed a reputation as a great raconteur himself, with many humorous anecdotes in his memoirs about members of all parties. Isobel Lindsay suggests that at the time he was seen by the political and media establishment as a 'pleasant "character" who was acceptable in the Westminster club.'²¹ Sandy Matheson, who went on to follow him to high office in the local council, agrees that he commanded respect across Westminster, from the policeman at the

¹⁴ Brian Wilson, 'Genial Nationalist from the Isles', *The Guardian*, August 24th 1992, Proquest Historical Newspapers, *The Guardian and Observer*: London, 31

¹⁵ Richard Sharpe, 'Nationalists gain seat', *The Times*: London, Saturday June 20, 1970, page 2, Issue 5789

¹⁶ Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 10

¹⁷ Winnie Ewing, *Stop the World: The Autobiography of Winnie Ewing*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2004) 79

¹⁸ Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 10

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p10

²⁰ Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 115

²¹ Isobel Lindsay, 'The SNP and Westminster' in *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*, ed Gerry Hassan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 96

gate up to Cabinet members, but argues that while he became part of the Westminster system of government, he never became part of the Westminster establishment.²²

During his time in office, he was, as the Times describes, 'careful to avoid becoming simply a figurehead in a nationalist crusade. His primary concerns were the appalling social conditions of the Western Isles: unemployment (with 25 per cent of the working population on the dole), emigration, alcoholism and costly transport.'²³ He brought forward a Private Members Bill to improve the position and status of the Gaelic language and made a number of interventions on behalf of fishermen. He was also influential during his early period in office, along with the Liberal MP for Inverness-shire, Russell Johnston, in amending the plans for local government reform, so that for the first time there was a single authority to cover all of the Western Isles. It has been suggested by Brian Wilson that this may have been a 'mixed blessing, but the overall contribution to the self-confidence and economy of the islands has been considerable'²⁴. Stewart himself felt that the creation of the council had been good for the islands and also made his job as an MP easier.²⁵

Stewart was certainly revered in his native islands, and he was re-elected with increasingly large majorities at each election until his retirement in 1987. Sandy Matheson describes him as effectively the 'father of the Western Isles as a single political unit' and someone who had a profound influence on the development of the islands in the 1970s, due to his assistance in promoting the Arnish construction yard, the Western Isles Development Board and the Gaelic language.²⁶ Voters in the islands felt that the 'Western Isles was enjoying a good name at the centre of power'²⁷. Such was the esteem with which he was held, at the 1979 election the local Labour candidate went to the house of the Labour election agent in Barra, only to find an SNP poster in the window, which was surreptitiously removed and replaced by a Labour one on hearing who his visitor was!²⁸ Wilson summarises: 'In the Western Isles, his outlook, demeanour and identification with local causes fitted a large proportion of his constituents like a glove and he saw off various challenges-including my own- with ease.'²⁹

In Westminster, during the period 1970-1974, apart from a brief spell from 1973 when he was joined by Margo Macdonald following her win at a by-election, Donald Stewart was a 'one-man band' for the SNP. While this may have had its challenges, it also suited him. As he joked himself, 'It was not as difficult as it might appear, and in fact it had distinct advantages. At any given moment I knew (a) where the Parliamentary party was, and (b) how it intended to vote.'³⁰ Members of the local

²² Interview, Sandy Matheson, 16th February 2016

²³ 'Obituary: Donald Stewart', *The Times*, London. Monday August 24th 1992, 13, issue 64419

²⁴ Brian Wilson, 'Genial Nationalist from the Isles', *The Guardian*, August 24th 1992, Proquest Historical Newspapers, The Guardian and Observer: London, 31

²⁵ Donnie Macinnes, 'Donald looks back', *Stornoway Gazette*, week ending December 5th 1987

²⁶ Interview, Sandy Matheson, 16th February 2016

²⁷ Interview, Sandy Matheson, 16th February 2016

²⁸ Interview, Sandy Matheson, 16th February 2016

²⁹ Brian Wilson, 'Genial Nationalist from the Isles', *The Guardian*, August 24th 1992, Proquest Historical Newspapers, The Guardian and Observer: London, 31

³⁰ Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 115

constituency association remember how, unlike current politicians who send regular email updates, Stewart very much took his own path, noting that 'consultation wasn't really his thing.'³¹

This significant freedom from the confines of party loyalty allowed him to largely plough his own path, reflecting his own strong moral values, which mirrored the values of many of his constituents at the time. The Times suggested that 'his conservative nationalism suited both the Calvinism of the northern islands and the Catholicism of the southern ones. As well as favouring Scotland's breakaway from England, he opposed easy divorce and abortion and supported capital punishment.'³² He was also very much in favour of the abolition of nuclear weapons. Stewart is described by friends as being a 'small 'c' conservative' and many of his views were derived from his Free Church of Scotland background and upbringing. As Wilson illustrates, 'while he never pushed religious views down anyone's throat, he was unswerving in his beliefs, and despite how unfashionable they may have been, he stuck to them all'.³³

Stewart went on to win two out of every three votes cast in the following election in February 1974, when he was joined by 6 other SNP MPs in the House of Commons, the so-called 'magnificent seven' and at the October 1974 election, this number rose to 11, the 'first eleven'. As the longest serving parliamentarian and a figure who commanded respect, Donald Stewart was the obvious choice for leader of the Parliamentary Party in 1974 and he was elected unanimously by his fellow MPs without a ballot.³⁴ Stewart continued in some ways where he had left off, still preferring to follow his own path and keep up his strong cross-party relationships. Winnie Ewing noted that the new parliamentarians often dined together after parliamentary sessions, with Stewart attending only occasionally such was the demand he was in by members of all parties in the House of Commons.³⁵ His wife Chrissie claimed that it 'was a shot in the arm to Donald that he now had ten colleagues'³⁶. There was also some safety in numbers, with Ewing remembering that Stewart had made it a 'strict rule from the beginning that none of us [SNP MPs] drank alone, fearing if we did so then we could be misquoted or compromised by those who wanted us to fail.'³⁷

The role of Parliamentary Leader at this time was not an easy one for Stewart: with eleven MPs, among them some strong characters, and a lack of clear party policy or shared ideology on all issues, it was now harder to ensure party coherence. Tensions surfaced within the parliamentary group at times both for political and personal reasons. As Lindsay notes, the personal problems in the parliamentary group were endemic in all the Westminster parties, brought about by the culture; however, these were 'more visible in a small group' and had 'some impact on [SNP] group morale because it caused some embarrassment to those whose behaviour was impeccable.'³⁸ Friends of Donald Stewart recollect that fellow parliamentarians often turned to Donald and his wife, Chrissie, for support in these times, because of the kind of people they were, with Mrs Stewart seen almost

³¹ Interview, Rae and Nellie Mackenzie, 8th February 2016

³² 'Obituary: Donald Stewart', *The Times*, London. Monday August 24th 1992, 13, issue 64419

³³ Brian Wilson, 'Genial Nationalist from the Isles', *The Guardian*, August 24th 1992, Proquest Historical Newspapers, The Guardian and Observer: London, 31

³⁴ 'Obituary: Donald Stewart', *The Times*, London. Monday August 24th 1992, 13, issue 64419

³⁵ Winnie Ewing, *Stop the World: The Autobiography of Winnie Ewing*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2004) 154

³⁶ Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 118

³⁷ Winnie Ewing, *Stop the World: The Autobiography of Winnie Ewing*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2004) 154

³⁸ Isobel Lindsay, 'The SNP and Westminster' in *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*, ed Gerry Hassan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 98

as the 'mother of Parliament' and as a counsellor to many of the parliamentary group.³⁹ Winnie Ewing describes Donald Stewart in a similar vein: 'to the SNP Members in the Commons he was our father-figure, our counsellor, and someone who could uplift our spirits with a formidable force of wit.'⁴⁰

There were political tensions to be managed too, between the parliamentary group and the Party's National Executive Committee (NEC) back in Scotland, who were unused to having such numbers of elected representatives. The Times described the situation thus: 'through Donald Stewart, member for the Western Isles and party leader, the outriders in London keep in touch with the body politic in Edinburgh but the accent has shifted distinctly southwards'.⁴¹ The Party Chairman at the time, Billy Wolfe emphasised after the February 1974 election how the parliamentary group and the party institutions at home discussed tactics closely, though the group in parliament had complete freedom of decision.⁴² The parliamentary group did vote against the wishes of the NEC on the 1976 Aircraft and Shipbuilding Nationalisation Bill and tensions also arose due to differing views on devolution and votes of confidence against the minority Labour government.⁴³

Devolution had become the key issue for the SNP during this time. The development of the Scottish oil industry, and the party espousal of the 'It's Scotland's Oil' slogan, had given a boost to the independence cause in the mid-1970s. The rise in popularity of the SNP had contributed to the pressure on the Labour Party to promise, just prior to the October 1974 election, the creation of a Scottish Assembly, and the parliamentary group had hoped to capitalise on this and the weakness of the minority Wilson and Callaghan governments. However, the SNP itself was divided on the issue, as was the parliamentary group, between those who wanted independence, nothing less, and those who accepted that devolution and a Scottish assembly was an acceptable step on the way to this end goal.

Donald Stewart fell in the latter camp, using a speech in parliament to outline 'in deliberately undramatic style, the step-by-step process towards independence: first the passage of a Bill setting up an elected Scottish assembly which would in turn create an irresistible demand for control over industry, then a fixed share of oil revenues and then budget control. Scotland, he emphasised, wanted full sovereignty with control of borders, oil revenues and a separate defence force. 'One day', he predicted, 'we'll wake up and find that, without quite realising it, we've been given the whole cake.'⁴⁴ The acceptance that the party needed to first get a Scottish legislature delivered was the majority view in the party as a whole and among the MPs, and was a priority for the NEC.⁴⁵

³⁹ Interview, Rae and Nellie Mackenzie, 8th February 2016

⁴⁰ cited in Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 124

⁴¹ The Times, :London, 'The man who put wheels on the Scottish bandwagon', Tuesday March 26 1974, pg 14, issue 59048

⁴² The Times, :London, 'The man who put wheels on the Scottish bandwagon', Tuesday March 26 1974, pg 14, issue 59048

⁴³ Isobel Lindsay, 'The SNP and Westminster' in *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*, ed Gerry Hassan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 98

⁴⁴ 'Obituary: Donald Stewart', *The Times*, London. Monday August 24th 1992, 13, issue 64419

⁴⁵ Isobel Lindsay, 'The SNP and Westminster' in *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*, ed Gerry Hassan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 99

The enthusiasm for devolution in Scotland led to a backlash at Westminster. Many hours were devoted to the issue and to the passage of the Scotland Bill, leading to bitterness from other MPs, with Stewart stating that the 'antagonism in the House of Commons [] was palpable'.⁴⁶ Even the Queen made a rare foray into politics, passing a thinly veiled comment on the issue in 1977, when the time being spent on the Scotland Bill in the House of Commons was at its height. Speaking to both Houses of Parliament, she commented 'I cannot forget I was crowned Queen of the United Kingdom'. Winnie Ewing felt it was 'a clear and obvious political rebuke to the SNP and to the hundreds of thousands of Scots who supported the party', but Donald Stewart calmly responded to the press afterwards that 'if he ever had to make the choice (and he hoped he never would) between the Queen and the freedom of Scotland, he would choose the freedom of his country.'⁴⁷

The devolution issue dragged on and there was a 'growing weariness in Scotland with the whole process'.⁴⁸ The parliamentary group in Westminster was also feeling the strain, with Ewing describing how 'night after night, the SNP group would troop through the voting lobbies becoming more and more disenchanted with the matter and the way in which it was being handled'. As Leader of the Parliamentary group, Stewart had to try and motivate his colleagues: Ewing describes how 'Donnie did a superb job in keeping the morale up, but it was soul destroying to see the great opportunity for change being gerrymandered in this way'.⁴⁹ Stewart had a very keen sense of humour and Ewing tells of how, one night after a particularly terrible House of Commons defeat on the Scotland Bill, Stewart instructed the group to stay on the Commons benches while he regaled them with a joke about John Wayne and the group left the chamber laughing, much to the surprise of their political opponents.⁵⁰ In doing so, he knew it sent an important image to their antagonists.

The Scotland Bill dragged through Parliament facing numerous amendments aimed at weakening its powers, culminating in the need for a positive referendum result requiring the support of more than 40 per cent of the electorate in order to create a Scottish Assembly. The SNP faced a problem at third reading stage, with a number of the parliamentary group in favour of voting against the Bill. Stewart remarked that it was a position that could be argued for, since the Bill was now 'even sorer in appearance than at first showing' and describing it as 'anaemic'.⁵¹ However, it was felt that it was 'a start on a first degree of decision-making returning to Scotland' and so the entire parliamentary group supported it. As Donald Stewart reflected ruefully in 1978: "You've got to go one way or the other. There are only two lobbies in the House of Commons. I sometimes wish there were three."⁵²

This was pertinent again in autumn 1978 when the majority in the parliamentary group wanted to vote against the government in a confidence motion, contrary to the wishes of the SNP's NEC. There were divisions in the parliamentary group; two of them did not vote with the others and the motion was unsuccessful.⁵³ Following the defeat of devolution in the referendum in 1979, despite a slim

⁴⁶ 'Obituary: Donald Stewart', *The Times*, London. Monday August 24th 1992, 13, issue 64419

⁴⁷ Winnie Ewing, *Stop the World: The Autobiography of Winnie Ewing*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2004) 143

⁴⁸ Winnie Ewing, *Stop the World: The Autobiography of Winnie Ewing*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2004) 158

⁴⁹ Winnie Ewing, *Stop the World: The Autobiography of Winnie Ewing*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2004) 158

⁵⁰ Winnie Ewing, *Stop the World: The Autobiography of Winnie Ewing*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2004) 158

⁵¹ Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 120

⁵² Brian Wilson, 'Genial Nationalist from the Isles', *The Guardian*, August 24th 1992, Proquest Historical Newspapers, The Guardian and Observer: London, 31

⁵³ Isobel Lindsay, 'The SNP and Westminster' in *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*, ed Gerry Hassan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 99

majority voting in favour, the issue of a confidence motion arose again. While there was some reluctance within the parliamentary group this time, given the prospect of an immediate election, there was support from the wider party and the NEC, who felt it was the only way to salvage anything out of the Scotland Act.⁵⁴

Stewart himself was rather reluctant to support a no confidence vote, as he was personally quite close to Jim Callaghan, and the confidence vote was one occasion when he would have quite liked that third 'lobby'.⁵⁵ Indeed, he claimed that 'in better times, he [Callaghan] would have made an outstanding Prime Minister'.⁵⁶ He met with the Prime Minister on the eve of the vote and describes how he had a 'friendly talk in which he [Callaghan] appeared relaxed and even fatalistic as I made clear the intention of the SNP to vote against the government unless the Scotland Bill was submitted on a vote of confidence basis.'⁵⁷ They both knew that this would not happen and despite Callaghan's taunt that the SNP were 'turkeys voting for an early Christmas', the SNP went on to vote unanimously against the government. As Wilson suggests, 'as far as Donald was concerned, Labour's inability to deliver a Scottish Assembly was the crucial factor and he led his troops accordingly- a few of them much against their own better judgements.'⁵⁸ In fact, Stewart himself had some reservations, according to Tam Dalyell, Labour MP at the time. He suggests that it was Stewart's fellow MP, Douglas Henderson, who had persuaded his more cautious colleagues to support the censure motion and that Donald Stewart had later told Dalyell that he 'deeply regretted caving in to Henderson's impetuosity', in Dalyell's words, given that the party was left with only two seats at the subsequent election.⁵⁹

Given his declared socialist views, Stewart must also have regretted that this decision led to the following 18 years of Tory government. However, despite declaring himself 'on the left politically', he had argued that if he had to choose between the Tory and Labour parties as Secretary of State for Scotland, he would opt for a Tory, as he felt that a Tory Secretary of State was more sympathetic and helpful to his rural constituency. He found that in his time representing the Western Isles, the 'big developments in [that] area were initiated by Tory Secretaries'.⁶⁰ He had mixed views on many of the leading Tories at the time, outlined in his memoirs, with some receiving praise (he described Alick Buchanan Smith as 'utterly trustworthy' and Enoch Powell as the 'outstanding Parliamentarian of the 1970s and 80s') while others received fairly scathing criticism (Margaret Thatcher, he viewed as 'an inverted Midas whose touch turned everything to dross' and Michael Heseltine was described as 'an 'eyes blazing with insincerity' type).

⁵⁴ Isobel Lindsay, 'The SNP and Westminster' in *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*, ed Gerry Hassan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 99

⁵⁵ Brian Wilson, 'Genial Nationalist from the Isles', *The Guardian*, August 24th 1992, Proquest Historical Newspapers, The Guardian and Observer: London, 31

⁵⁶ Donnie Macinnes, 'Donald looks back', *Stornoway Gazette*, week ending December 5th 1987

⁵⁷ Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 89

⁵⁸ Brian Wilson, 'Genial Nationalist from the Isles', *The Guardian*, August 24th 1992, Proquest Historical Newspapers, The Guardian and Observer: London, 31

⁵⁹ Tam Dalyell, 'Douglas Henderson: Obituary', *The Independent*, London, 18th September 2006, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/douglas-henderson-416599.html>, accessed 10th February 2016

⁶⁰ Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 105

While he had respect for individuals within the Labour Party, such as Tony Benn ('his impact on the Parliamentary scene was tremendous and a staggering achievement'), Donald Dewar ('rational and fair') and John Smith ('a politician of a high standard and a nice man'), he was highly critical of the path the Labour Party had taken. He noted in his memoirs in the early 1990s, that 'I cannot help, as a one-time member, being struck by the distance the party has travelled from the ideals and aims of Socialism'.⁶¹ He was particularly scathing of the party's support for the financial sector: 'So far has the sell-out of Socialism gone that Labour has supported the bailing out of Stock Exchange gamblers who had had a poor year at Lloyds after years of piling up profits.'⁶² One can only imagine what he would have to say about the current financial crisis.

From his comments on his fellow MPs, it is clear that what Donald Stewart valued most in others was integrity and strong beliefs, and he particularly admired those who had the courage of their own convictions regardless of party loyalty. He acknowledged that 'no matter how divergent their views from mine, I have always had a salute for the men of independent mind, the 'out-of-step', the thumbs-of-noses at party brass.'⁶³ It could be said that this was how he himself approached his own role and position within his own party.

So how did Donald Stewart's views fit within the party at the time? The party had lacked a clear ideological direction itself, with its membership united mainly by the desire for Scottish self-government. In 1974, eight of the SNP's eleven seats had been won from the Conservatives, but the SNP election manifestos in 1974 had proclaimed the SNP as a social democratic party and proposed a range of social democratic policies.⁶⁴ In the 1970s, the party had begun to focus more on producing detailed policy positions and Billy Wolfe's election as party leader in 1969 was seen as an endorsement of a policy-focused SNP⁶⁵ as opposed to one that would stay neutral on policy (and ideology) until there was a Scottish parliament in place to make detailed policy.⁶⁶

Donald Stewart was not in favour of this approach, arguing that 'a broad national movement should not be confined to a 'specific philosophy of Left and Right''⁶⁷. In a speech to the SNP's annual conference in Rothesay in 1980, referring to the guideline laid down by one of the party's founders, Stewart argued, 'Scotland free can take a Left road or a Right road- but it will be a Scottish road. That is the fundamental aim- Scottish independence.'⁶⁸ He was also highly critical of the left-wing '79 group, which had formed with the intention of moving the party to the left, and which included many future prominent members of the party, including Alex Salmond, Margo Macdonald and Jim Sillars, the former Labour MP who had joined the party at that time. Stewart felt that this might

⁶¹ Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 66

⁶² Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 66

⁶³ Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 58

⁶⁴ Peter Lynch, *SNP: The History of the Scottish National Party* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2002) 133

⁶⁵ William Miller, *The End of British Politics?: Scots and English political behaviour in the seventies*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 47

⁶⁶ Peter Lynch, 'From Social Democracy back to No Ideology? - The Scottish National Party and Ideological Change in a Multi-level Electoral Setting', *Regional & Federal Studies*, Volume 19, Issue 4-5, 2009, Special Issue: New Challenges for Stateless Nationalist and Regionalist Parties, 619-637

⁶⁷ Peter Hetherington, 'Independence before ideology, Scots MP tells nationalists', *The Guardian* Jun 2, 1980, Proquest Historical Newspapers, The Guardian and the Observer, 2.

⁶⁸ Peter Hetherington, 'Independence before ideology, Scots MP tells nationalists', *The Guardian* Jun 2, 1980, Proquest Historical Newspapers, The Guardian and the Observer, 2.

jeopardise the struggle for Scotland's independence by putting narrow ideologies before party unity, making a speech 'designed to reinforce more fundamental nationalist elements in the party who believe that it should strongly resist any political philosophy until independence is achieved.'⁶⁹

One issue which did require a policy position to be taken by the party was that of the European Union. Stewart was a firm opponent of the UK's membership of the European Economic Community (EEC), as it was at the time. He had been opposed to the UK's membership in 1972, and in the great debate on the Common Market and subsequent referendum in 1975, he continued to campaign against UK membership. He felt uncomfortable, as someone who had served in the war, as he put it, 'to line up with continental countries, some of whom had been in the enemy camp.'⁷⁰ He was highly sceptical of the trade benefits, critical of the scale of fraud as he saw it, and very much against the Common Agricultural Policy and Common Fisheries Policy, which he felt did tremendous harm to his own constituency. Indeed, he expressed his satisfaction regarding the rejection of the EEC by his constituency, the Western Isles, one of only two constituencies that had voted no, and it had been 'particularly emphatic [] where on a turnout of just over 50 per cent, the 'no' votes totalled 8109 (70.5 per cent) with 3,393 (29.5 per cent voting yes)'.⁷¹ As usual, he used the opportunity to extol the virtues of his homeland: "The Western Isles are a stronghold of feeling against the Common market. [] This decision is by no means parochial. The people are well educated, as our rates of educational success show. They are well travelled as merchant seamen. They are well able to make a sound judgment on the merits of the issue'.⁷²

The Scottish National Party campaigned for a 'no' vote in 1975 and Donald Stewart was one of the most vehement proponents of this stance. His view was that 'it seemed illogical (to put it mildly) for a Nationalist striving to regain power for the people of Scotland, to hand over power to a faceless European bureaucracy'.⁷³ Stewart argued at the time of the referendum that 'people had suffered enough from government from London and had no wish to replace it with government from Brussels' and expressed the intention that 'when a Scottish government is set up it will carry out the decision to pull out of Europe'.⁷⁴ However, in the mid-1980s, the party's stance on Europe changed considerably, and the campaign for 'Independence in Europe' was adopted in 1988⁷⁵. By then, Donald Stewart had stepped down as President of the Party and retired from Parliament, yet he never wavered in his hostility to the European Union⁷⁶.

Donald Stewart has been described as 'the father of the modern SNP'⁷⁷ and held significant posts within the party, as leader of the Parliamentary Group from 1970 until his retirement in 1987 and Party President from 1982 to 1987. What was his legacy as leader over this period? Mitchell argues

⁶⁹ Peter Hetherington, 'Independence before ideology, Scots MP tells nationalists', *The Guardian* Jun 2, 1980, Proquest Historical Newspapers, The Guardian and the Observer, 2.

⁷⁰ Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 66

⁷¹ 'Western Isles and the Shetlands vote 'No'', *The Times*, London. Saturday June 07, 1975, 1, Issue 59416

⁷² 'Western Isles and the Shetlands vote 'No'', *The Times*, London. Saturday June 07, 1975, 1, Issue 59416

⁷³ Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 50

⁷⁴ 'Western Isles and the Shetlands vote 'No'', *The Times*, London. Saturday June 07, 1975, 1, Issue 59416

⁷⁵ Eve Hepburn, 'Degrees of Independence: SNP Thinking in an International Context', in *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*, ed Gerry Hassan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 193

⁷⁶ Brian Wilson, 'Genial Nationalist from the Isles', *The Guardian*, August 24th 1992, Proquest Historical Newspapers, The Guardian and Observer: London, 31

⁷⁷ Andy Collier, 'Legend', *Independence: The SNP Magazine* (Glasgow: Saltire Magazines/Scottish National Party, 2015) September/October 2015, Issue 34, 22

that he 'preferred Westminster and the Western isles over mainland Scotland. There was no lack of charisma, enthusiasm or ideas, but an absence of discipline and means to channel the party's abundant energy in a clear direction.'⁷⁸ His approach to leadership was to lead by the carrot rather than the stick, and to lead quietly by example rather than by pushing, cajoling or over-powering. As Sandy Matheson describes, he was not an authoritarian, 'up and at them' figure. By putting forward his own case calmly and politely, and standing his ground with principle, he hoped that others would follow.⁷⁹ Friends have suggested that as a leader he was good at calming troubled waters if there was friction.⁸⁰ He was renowned for his plain talking approach and calm demeanour, a leadership style perhaps better suited to the role of a Chairman than a strategic political leader.

No profile of Donald Stewart is complete without further acknowledgment of the important role played by his wife, Chrissie, who accompanied him to London during his time in Parliament. Such was her importance, Sandy Matheson argues that, 'as good a man as he was, Donald Stewart would not have been the man he was without Chrissie'. She was ever present at his side and 'if Donnie missed a trick she quietly picked it up and ran with it'.⁸¹ She was said to be instrumental in the creation of a family room in the House of Commons where she met with the wives of fellow MPs, helping to build up their network of friends across the political spectrum. As Wilson suggests, 'Donald's popularity in parliamentary circles was matched by that of his wife Chrissie.'⁸² Winnie Ewing hailed Chrissie as the Parliamentary party's twelfth member and 'our secret weapon.'⁸³ Sandy Matheson described them as 'a formidable political partnership, renowned for their inherent generosity and welcoming hospitality,'⁸⁴ while friends in the constituency, Rae and Nellie Mackenzie, suggest that they were a unique team, where you got 'two for the price of one'⁸⁵. Chrissie Stewart's significant role was recognised when they were the first to be awarded the honour of Freeman of the Western Isles in 1988 in recognition of their service to the community.

Stewart was appointed as a Privy Councillor in 1977 but on his retirement in 1987 turned down the offer of a seat in the House of Lords⁸⁶. As always, he refused to put political expediency before principle, based on his belief in the undemocratic nature of the institution and his feeling that the existence of the SNP in the Lords would set the party firmly within the British Establishment. Fellow party members such as Winnie Ewing disagreed with his stance, but Stewart was firm in his view that 'a decision by the Scottish National Party to accept the offer of a Lords seat will signify that the Party has opted for squatting in a British lay-by in preference to advancing along the road to Scottish independence.'⁸⁷

⁷⁸ James Mitchell. 'From Breakthrough to Mainstream: The Politics of Potential and Blackmail, in *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*, ed Gerry Hassan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 34

⁷⁹ Interview, Sandy Matheson, 16th February 2016

⁸⁰ Interview, Rae and Nellie Mackenzie, 8th February 2016

⁸¹ Interview, Sandy Matheson, 16th February 2016

⁸² Brian Wilson, 'Genial Nationalist from the Isles', *The Guardian*, August 24th 1992, Proquest Historical Newspapers, The Guardian and Observer: London, 31

⁸³ Winnie Ewing, *Stop the World: The Autobiography of Winnie Ewing*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2004) 125

⁸⁴ Interview, Sandy Matheson, 16th February 2016

⁸⁵ Interview, Rae and Nellie Mackenzie, 8th February 2016

⁸⁶ Winnie Ewing, *Stop the World: The Autobiography of Winnie Ewing*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2004) 154

⁸⁷ Donald Stewart, *A Scot at Westminster* (Sydney, Canada: The Catalone Press, 1994) 78

Instead, upon his retirement, Donald Stewart was happily at home in the streets of Stornoway, smoking his ever-present pipe. He died, aged 71, in August 1992, following a heart attack. Glowing tributes were paid to him upon his death, reflecting the esteem in which he was held by both by supporters and opponents, who reflected on him as a man of integrity and conviction. The Independent described him as ‘the most popular member of the Commons’⁸⁸ and Alex Salmond paid tribute to him as achieving ‘the rare distinction of being universally respected by political friend and foe alike’⁸⁹. Perhaps, as his sister suggests, his career is best summed up in the words from the Independent:

‘In his public life he evinced modesty, honesty, trustworthiness- qualities almost unique in a modern politician. He set his style on his party and his cause which he advanced mightily, securing for it a permanent and respected place in Scottish politics.’⁹⁰

⁸⁸ ‘Obituary: Donald Stewart’, *The Independent*, London, August 25th 1992

⁸⁹ Stornoway Gazette 25th August 1992

⁹⁰ ‘Obituary: Donald Stewart’, *The Independent*, London, August 25th 1992

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