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All of Us: Nigel Smith**

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An Example of the Good Public Life for All of Us: Nigel Smith

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Nigel Smith who died unexpectedly at his home in Campsie Glen in East Dunbartonshire last week at the age of 78 was never a household name. Many reading this will never have heard of him, but he was an important figure in the public life of Scotland and the UK over the past 25 years.

In his working life, Nigel was a businessman, running his own engineering company in Glasgow's Springburn for just under 30 years. More than this, he was active in public life especially concerning referendums in Scotland, the UK and internationally; and in other major issues such as the future of broadcasting.

Nigel was that rare creature – a pro-devolution businessman who felt that bodies like CBI Scotland did not speak for him, or for a whole swathe of opinion supportive or sympathetic to a Scottish Parliament.

In the 1979 referendum he had some small involvement in the campaign and the group 'Business for Yes'. This was to be a salutary experience, because the pro-devolution campaign was divided and outmanoeuvred by its opponents, lacking a single umbrella organisation due to Labour-SNP mutual suspicion.

In 1996 the Labour Party led by Tony Blair came out for a two question referendum on a Scottish Parliament: a policy which stunned Scottish Labour and home rule campaigners. Nigel was convinced that the experience of 1979 pointed to the need for a single central organisation making the case for the Parliament, and that this body could not be the cross-party Constitutional Convention – which included Labour, Lib Dems and Greens, but not the SNP.

Nigel worked tirelessly behind the scenes over 1996-97 to make the case that a new body was needed which would bring together all pro-Scottish Parliament opinion. He met politicians from all the non-Tory parties, raised funds, and commissioned professional polling research on what voters thought of the arguments for and against a Scottish Parliament. This is where I first met Nigel, working with him to shape these findings into a communications message strategy for the coming referendum. It was the start of a near 25 year friendship.

Esther Robertson, Co-ordinator of the Scottish Constitutional Convention, who worked with Nigel on the 1997 campaign remembers:

*He made the case for a joined up campaign in so many quarters until he got the agreement he needed. I believe that it was his credibility – and his persistence as an honest broker with the*

*leadership of the three main parties that brought them together in the campaign.*

She reflects about the qualities he brought to this:

*I could write a book about my time working with Nigel. What too many people who should know but probably don't is the commitment of time, energy and hard cash Nigel committed to the cause when he had no guarantee of success. He commissioned – at his own expense – substantial professional polling evidence to demonstrate to the Convention and others where the support for a parliament lay and what would be needed to win the referendum.*

Prof. James Mitchell of Edinburgh University also knew Nigel and has written extensively about this period and the politics of devolution. He assesses that:

*Nigel provided a different form of leadership from the political parties in these critical years. He was patient, attentive to the range of opinions and sought consensus without abandoning principle. He was persistent and unstinting in his approach and generally avoided the limelight. He was trusted.*

Nigel went on to provide a key advisory role in a nearby polity that needed even more to surmount entrenched divisions, namely Northern Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement peace process led to the May 1998 referendum in the North – as well as a simultaneous vote in the Republic. Nigel came to the province and gave his time and experience of putting together a united campaign for change. Quintin Oliver became the main organiser of that organisation. He remembers well the impact and influence of Nigel:

*As soon as Nigel came through the door of our planning meeting on St Patrick's Day 1998, as we set up our Yes Campaign in Belfast, I knew he was going to be a star. Kind, thoughtful and insightful, but also relentlessly determined. He advised a cross-party integrated referendum campaign: we laughed, thinking of Nationalists and the Unionists ever working together. He was right, we persisted, they did. John Hume shook David Trimble's hand, for the first time ever in public, on our platform as Bono presided. We owe Nigel a huge debt of gratitude.*

At the same time Nigel became involved in the campaign to get the BBC to better reflect in its broadcasting the diversity of the UK and its four nations. He was an advocate of what was called 'the Scottish Six' – an integrated news service which would provide Scottish, UK and international news in one package.

This nearly came about in the early years of New Labour – and was stopped by a mix of lack of

leadership and active lobbying. Nigel spoke passionately about how ‘the Six’ did not happen, holding Donald Dewar and senior BBC Scotland personnel responsible for failing to lead, and calling out Tony Blair, Peter Mandelson and John Birt, then Director General of the BBC, for actively lobbying to stop it.

It was to take 20 further years before change came to BBC Scotland, but as Nigel tirelessly pointed out the BBC and other broadcasters at their centre had to change how they represented and understood the UK – from the idea of an evolving, fast changing Britain to the four distinct nations. They have in their London silos made little real progress – as the misrepresentation of the 2014 indyref and 2016 Brexit campaigns and much more make clear.

Nigel worked not just across party but across and beyond tribal lines, and always had a view or position developed because of principle, evidence or experience, or a mix of all three. For example, when it was unfashionable in left and liberal circles he was against the euro because he felt it would not have the democratic accountability, legitimacy, or importantly, the political and economic muscle of adequate fiscal transfers across the EU to make it work effectively.

This was the gateway for Nigel into a thoughtful Euroscepticism and working with organisations such as Open Europe. This was a useful caveat for people like myself. Nigel used to gently point out my regular caricaturing in print of the Brexit project and its right-wing supporters. This would lead me to reply that he had a point but that there was a right-wing elite capture of the Brexit project which was unlikely to end well for the UK or the more working class, centre-left Brexit supporters. We both gained from these exchanges.

James Mitchell makes a wider point from the way Nigel conducted himself:

*Nigel could be unpredictable in his political outlook largely because he took little for granted, happily questioning and challenging orthodoxies. His public spiritedness allied with a quiet confidence meant that he focused much more on policy outcomes than personal ambition. This independence meant he could be trusted not to take predictable party political positions, work across political persuasions but also meant he couldn't be taken for granted.*

Nigel's public life was conducted without trying to gain publicity or favour, or to increase his status with any group. His example offers lessons for today's age and how we bring about change, and challenge power, in both Scotland and UK.

He was from the generation who experienced unprecedented peace and prosperity as they grew up,

having been born in 1941 in Girvan. He remembered the end of the British Empire, and once told me in a detailed interview on his life about going to the House of Commons in 1959 and by happenchance witnessing a piece of history.

Nigel was into the public gallery and witnessed the parliamentary debate on the Hola massacre by British colonial authorities in Kenya – killing eleven people and seriously injuring many more, subsequently attempting a cover-up. He heard Enoch Powell say that this was a terrible moral moment for Britain in a speech that Labour's Denis Healey who was present called 'the greatest parliamentary speech I ever heard' – with the teenage Nigel sitting in the gallery directly above the government front bench.

Nigel had no illusions about the nature of British imperial and military excesses. He had no sentimental love of the past Britain of post-1945, talking with experience of its stultifying deference, people feeling they could not speak out against authority, and lack of voice of workers in employment.

He would vividly recall coming to Glasgow's East End in the 1960s and being stunned at the poverty, dislocation, and acceptance of this by people who he knew from first-hand experience had so much intelligence, insight and humanity to offer which the prevailing economic and social system suppressed.

Nigel's most profound qualities are ones which are in peril in too many places and being regularly trashed and dismissed all over the world. He embodied kindness, humanity, curiosity, asking real questions, listening, and so much more. Academic Prof. Philip Schlesinger of Glasgow University captures this sense of the man and his contribution to public life saying:

*A man who never sought publicity, always curious and passionate about the big issues and with the most exceptional public spirit. What a loss, and really so premature! He was such a one-off. If there were honours deserved, he merited them, not that he ever sought them.*

Nigel had an ability to make things happen and for them not to be about him. In this he represented a rare mixture – a combination of the best of the older traditions of civic life and duty, combined with a more recent expression of continually wanting to ask difficult questions of authority and power.

We could all learn from such qualities – and in particular the emerging, younger radical voices rightly impatient at the state of the world and mainstream politics. Those who think continually being active on Twitter is a political campaign and that permanent self-promotion is the way to threaten the

economic and social order could pause and reflect on this unique example.

Humanity matters. As does the way each of us conducts ourselves. The way you come to a position and viewpoint. The relationships, exchanges and mutual respect people show each other. And what is often most telling is how each of us is prepared to leave our comfort zones, and how we interact with those we disagree with. Nigel was an example to all of us in this, as Esther Robertson states:

*Nigel had a quiet confidence and determination matched by humility and complete lack of interest in seeking a profile for himself. He may not have wanted any credit but I believe there should have been some way to recognise his significant contribution.*

As well as his human qualities Nigel combined this with that rare quality in Scotland of talking to those in power and challenging them without falling into one of two camps: either being entirely oppositional or being incorporated and compromised by those elites.

He had an inner voice and mission which was about a more open, democratic, dynamic, less hierarchical society. He was a passionate supporter of the Scottish Parliament, but a little bit less enamoured with the record of its actions and that of the Scottish Government, in the week before his death writing to the 'Financial Times' about the record of devolution on education and health.

We still have much to do in changing society and holding authority and power to account. This isn't about whether you are pro or anti-independence. Rather it is about what kind of society we want to be.

Nigel and I did not agree on everything, but we agreed on what matters. He was that rare thing – a political teacher and campaigner of the utmost integrity and principle who had influence and impact, and who changed and challenged how many people (including myself) thought of and acted in the world. Through his immense contribution Nigel Smith has shown what a good public life can be, and that we still have much to do in telling truth to power here in Scotland and wider afield.

Understanding that, and committing to carrying on his mission, would be a fitting tribute to such a life well led.