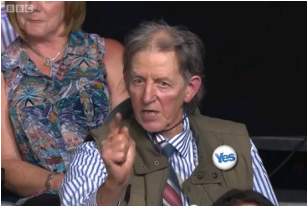


by **Bluddin Sawyil**, our Natfinder General

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Nigel is a passionate Highlander. He likes current affairs. He follows politics. He cares deeply about the outcome of the referendum. As good luck would have it, he discovers that Britain's flagship current affairs show is coming to his home town. Now's the moment, he thinks, to take my case for independence to the British people. Here's the ideal stage, to make my heartfelt case for the United Kingdom to change utterly.

Sitting quietly in the draughty hall as the first few questions are asked and answered, he waggles his hand with increasing urgency, bursting to speak, desperate to catch Dimblebumble's wandering gaze. At last, the ancient compère's eye alights upon him. "You sir," he says. Nigel's gorge rises. His heart pumps, eyes dazzle. At last, he finds his voice, uncertain at first, but then growing in vigour and conviction. He speaks:

"I am born in Inverness. I am a passionate Highlander. And I love Scotland. And I will take a stand to break up this United Kingdom. I will give my life for my country as my grandfather did in the First World War, and his brother Charlie. Highland Regiment! Scottish Army! I am Scottish forever. We will never, never change. We will end this Union, in the name of Jesus. I will break - if it's my own life - I will break up this country with my blood."

Afterwards, he feels cleansed, like he's got something off his chest. The volcanic energies which had been building up in him - temporarily released. Resolving to carry on with his struggle for independence tomorrow, he says a prayer for the departed souls of his grandfather and his brother. That night, he sleeps soundly. "The sleep of the just," he thinks to himself, as he stirs, cheerful and refreshed the next day. A wan sun shines early that morning. A sign that the man upstairs is not displeased, he thinks fondly, as he deposits the kettle on the aga and waits for it

to bubble with a welcome peal.

The first sign that all was not well was the incessant ringing of the land line. It starts after breakfast. Usually, the phone's grating trill only disturbed the peace one or twice a week. Now that terrible grating sound bounced endlessly through his cottage. When he gingerly plucked up the receiver, it was little better. Hectoring voices - journalists' voices - at the end of the line. "Are you prepared to answer some questions, Nigel?" "Would you care to comment on your hateful outburst, Nigel?" "Nigel, would you say you are a blood and soil nationalist?" "Where do you hope to be martyred for Scotland, Nigel?" "Does Jesus tell you to do anything else, Nigel?" "Do you use twitter or facebook, Nigel?"

He never lets them beyond the first or second question, planting the receiver down firmly, double-pressing the button at the back to make sure he'd cut off the call. But he couldn't disconnect the line entirely, or just let the phone ring out. His sister might call, or a neighbour, needing something urgently. So he sits, answering each time, each time reluctantly cutting short the ringing. It was around this time that the men arrive outside of his cottage. They seem to be carrying some sort of camera equipment. They skirt the house. He ignores them. Tourists probably, he thinks, on a walking holiday. Nervous he sits in his kitchen, answering the phone, bemusement mounting, drinking cup and after cup of tea. The milk runs out. He can't take tea without milk. He's been taking milk in his tea since his schooldays down in the big city.



A run to the shop, he thinks. Just what I need to clear my head and get me away from this confounded phone. A paper too, perhaps. Yes, definitely a paper. *To keep abreast of the affairs of the day*, he thinks, as his old father used to say when cracking his morning eggs and reading the financial section of the *Times* with a judicious merchant's eye. Donning gilet and tie, spruce, he steps out into the sunshine. A burst of photography. Flash, flash, flash. Brighter than the sun.

The tourists, he thinks, shielding his eyes, hurrying into his clapped out old landrover. Just an eagle. Or a deer. The keys won't fit in the ignition - just too much tea, the trembling hands, he thinks - more milk, more milk. With a scoosh of relief, the key sinks home and turns. The engine coughs into life. He pulls out of the driveway and scuds down the single-track road, the gravel

thrumming of the ancient engine somehow reassuring.

He didn't expect to see his own face - his image - burning out of the front pages. "NATIONALIST ACTIVIST IN BLOOD AND SOIL ROW" "HATEFUL CYBERNAT INVADES BELOVED BRITISH TV INSTITUTION WITH SEPARATIST THREATS" "I'LL DIE FOR SCOTLAND, SNP LUNATIC WARNS" "JESUS: HE'S NOT THE MESSIAH, HE'S A VERY BLOODY SEPARATIST."

The keys fell with a dull clatter from his numb, trembling hands. His temples throb. Back in Nigel's cottage, the phone rings incessantly. Another dazing burst of photography erupts from nowhere. Nigel shields his rheumy eyes, barely able to focus. *Milk*, he thinks, *milk*, trying to keep hold of something tangible - to keep the thread - as he lollops into the local shop, pulling his wax hat down low over his brow.

Miles south, in Glasgow, Rob Shorthouse puts the finishing touches to his press release in the Better Together HQ, crackling with unveiled glee. "The Yes campaign has hit a new low. This kind of language is completely unacceptable but all too common from those trying to break up Britain. The mask has slipped. The true face of the separatist movement is revealed. Salmond must act. We will consider referring these hateful and sinister comments to the proper authorities." In Hope Street, a nervous Yes Scotland official reassures the skeptical reporter on the other end of the line that Nigel is a lone eccentric and not really part of the campaign at all.

In newspaper offices across the land, in a fug of instant coffee and perspiration, time-taxed hacks squabble over whether "Cybernat" should be capitalised and put in inverted commas in their copy. Bored journalists phone around old work colleagues and neighbours for choice anecdotes about how Nigel always seemed like a nutter liable to leak his bodily fluids in pursuit of independence.

Peals of laughter rise from Scottish political staff in the Telegraph, Daily Mail and the Express as they gleefully put the boot in with thundering editorials about the evil spirits unleashed by this referendum and the "dark heart" of the case for separation. Labour press officers ponder creative ways to link a lone Highland weirdo to the First Minister's office. "Have they ever met? Can we find out?" Paul Sinclair rubs his hand, as he sits down to write Johann Lamont's script for FMQs. "This'll be an easy week," he thinks, gratefully.

And Nigel sits in his cottage, with the lights off, curtains pulled, phone tolling a constant judgment. He never did buy a paper that morning. Or the next.

Comments

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