

# Rogue Nation

Alan Clements



Mainstream Publishing *eBooks*



## About the Author

Alan Clements is the director of content at Scottish Television and the co-author of *Restless Nation*, which accompanied the BBC Scotland television series on Scottish politics. He is married to Kirsty Wark and has two children, Caitlin and James.

# **ROGUE NATION**

Alan Clements



**MAINSTREAM  
PUBLISHING**

**EDINBURGH AND LONDON**

This eBook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licenced or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorised distribution or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author's and publisher's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

Epub ISBN: 9781845968373

Version 1.0

[www.mainstreampublishing.com](http://www.mainstreampublishing.com)

This edition, 2010

Copyright © Alan Clements, 2009

All rights reserved

The moral right of the author has been asserted

First published in Great Britain in 2009 by

MAINSTREAM PUBLISHING COMPANY

(EDINBURGH) LTD

7 Albany Street

Edinburgh EH1 3UG

ISBN 9781845965808

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any other means without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for insertion in a magazine, newspaper or broadcast

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

*For my family*

*Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.*

Benjamin Franklin

# CHAPTER 1

---

## FRIDAY, 2 MAY 2014

*THE WHITE HOUSE, WASHINGTON DC, 00.10 A.M.*

President Todd MacFarlane strode the short path from the Oval Office along the side of the Rose Garden into the residence. As soon as he was out of view of the Secret Service agents, his body relaxed and he wearily made his way up the short flight of stairs to his bedroom. He was relieved to see that Janice was sleeping in her own room again tonight.

Shrugging off his jacket, he slumped onto his bed and turned on CNN to catch the headlines. He gave a low whistle at the breaking story leading the news. It looked like the political briefing he had been given that afternoon had been totally wrong and, from the way the two TV anchors were struggling to catch up, he clearly wasn't the only one who had been misinformed.

'Well, I'll be fucked,' he muttered to himself. 'Who would have thought the old country would have the balls. Goddamn polls never get anything right.'

He picked up the phone. 'Put an early morning call to Prime Minister Jones into the diary, please.'

Still, he mused, there surely must be some political advantage in this for a man called MacFarlane.

*NORTHUMBERLAND STREET, EDINBURGH, 5.15 A.M.*

George Wallace, the senior special adviser to Ross Johnson, Scotland's first minister, was wide awake, lying on the bed fully clothed. There was no point in trying to sleep now. He had to be with Ross at the studios in an hour. Radio first - *Today* and *Good Morning Scotland* - then breakfast TV, then

he would have to start with the foreign press. And all the dignified concession remarks he had prepared for the first minister would have to be ditched and new words of triumph written.

Beside him, Clare stirred and turned over. He smiled at her pixie features and cascade of brown hair, then swung his legs off the bed. He had secretly hoped she would wake up when he had lain down ten minutes before, but she had stayed resolutely asleep. He longed to share that morning's amazing news with the woman who had restored his life to happiness. That pleasure would have to wait.

George padded quietly to the kitchen and set the coffee machine to brew. Grabbing a mug, he wandered to the drawing-room windows to watch the sun rising over Edinburgh's New Town. He turned over some phrases to use on the press that morning, wondering if 'new dawn' was just too clichéd. Deciding that the new Scotland deserved better, he headed to the shower to clear his head of the two ill-judged celebratory whiskies he had downed when the result had finally been announced at 4 a.m.

*NUMBER 10 DOWNING STREET, LONDON, 8 A.M.*

Tony Hodge, the prime minister's chief of staff, knocked firmly on his boss's bedroom door. Barely waiting for the invitation, he strode in. After ten years working together, they no longer bothered with pleasantries. And the chief of staff had to talk urgently to his boss about the email the prime minister had sent him ten minutes after the referendum result had been announced.

'Are you sure you want to do this?' asked Hodge. 'It's all a bit Churchillian by your measured standards, isn't it? And those lefty ponces at the BBC are kicking up hell about balance . . .'

'I've made up my mind,' the prime minister replied, characteristically soft-spoken but decisive. 'It's the only way.'

It has to be a direct address to the nation. Christ Almighty, it's not every day the United Kingdom falls apart, so the masses will just have to wait ten minutes for *EastEnders*. Remind the director-general the licence fee is up for renewal in two years and that I am minded to share it with Channel Four. That should concentrate his mind. And make sure the whole Cabinet is here for nine sharp. This is definitely a day for collective responsibility. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get dressed.'

Tony Hodge's brief nod of his head was an acknowledgement of both the prime minister's decision and his own subservient position. He closed the door quietly behind him.

*THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE, THE KREMLIN, MOSCOW, 6.30 A.M.*

Colonel Sergei Karimov nervously entered the Senate building and athletically climbed the polished steps to the president's personal office two at a time. He knew in the short term this was not going to be a pleasant experience, but he also knew it was potentially the greatest opportunity in his career.

President Igor Churov was notoriously short-tempered and would not be best pleased that his top British specialist had got his intelligence briefing so spectacularly wrong. As an ex-FSB operative himself, President Churov took these things to heart.

The secretary seated at a desk outside the president's office waved him forward as soon as she noticed him at the top of the stairs. Colonel Karimov took a deep breath and knocked.

'Enter.'

Sergei Karimov's gaze swept quickly over the books adorning the oak-lined walls and rested on the burly figure seated behind the desk that dominated the room. 'Sir, as

requested, I have brought the latest figures. There is now no doubt that the “Yes” vote was victorious. It was incredibly close, but—’

‘But not the significant “No” vote you were predicting.’

All of Karimov’s training had drummed into him that calmness was the most effective response to aggression. ‘Unfortunately, the analysis of our political operatives was wrong. But to be fair, sir, not one political analyst predicted a “Yes” vote.’

President Churov’s face tightened with annoyance. ‘That’s hardly an excuse, Colonel Karimov. I expect the FSB’s intelligence officers to deliver me more insight than I can read in the newspapers.’

The president paused, torn between the desire to continue the dressing-down and the need to get on with the day’s business. The latter impulse won. ‘In any event,’ Churov continued, ‘we have more pressing matters. Obviously, this changes everything and grants us the opportunity we have been seeking. I want you to immediately begin Operation Braveheart.’

Karimov struggled hard not to show his delight. He kept his voice neutral and properly deferential. ‘Of course, sir. At once.’

‘And, Colonel.’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘I’m holding you personally responsible for its success. Don’t let me down . . . again.’

*THE WHITE HOUSE, WASHINGTON DC, 8 A.M.*

President MacFarlane’s private secretary put his head round the connecting door to the Oval Office. ‘The prime minister of the United Kingdom on line one, sir.’

Not for much longer he isn’t, thought Todd MacFarlane as he swung his legs off the desk and reached for the receiver. He hadn’t warmed to Nick Jones in the year since he had

become prime minister, resenting his superior tone and earnest, pointy-headed intellectualism. But this was duty. 'Prime Minister, a great pleasure to talk to you again. Even though my family are Scottish through and through, I would never have believed it would come to this and I'm deeply saddened for y'all in the United Kingdom.'

Nick Jones's response was surprisingly brisk and upbeat in response to MacFarlane's sympathy. 'Well, that is very kind, but don't be too downcast. The Scots have made their bed, so let them lie in it. This offers a great opportunity for England to flourish and I am determined to grab it. I've no intention of resisting this decision. Let's see how the Scots deal with the big bad world on their own. There may well be teething troubles between England and Scotland but, given the history of the special relationship between our two countries, I take it I can count on your support for us?'

'Of course,' MacFarlane replied, 'but you have to understand my position. The Scots-Americans are not an obvious lobby like the Irish or the Jews, but they are real powerful behind the scenes. As I speak, there will be a dozen senators burnishing their Caledonian credentials and welcoming the 193rd member of the United Nations. And the presidential primaries start in nine months, so I need to be balanced. It's just politics, you understand. Nothing personal.'

The prime minister bristled. He hated being patronised at any time, but to be offered lessons in political tactics from this jumped-up redneck was truly insufferable. 'Of course, Mr President, I understand. I'll keep you posted on our progress.'

*THE BALMORAL HOTEL, EDINBURGH, 11 A.M.*

George Wallace had always thought Jessica Schwartz, the *New York Times'* UK correspondent, was a bit special. She combined good looks and glamour with the self-confidence

and sense of entitlement that only an expensive Ivy League education can bring. How he envied that, he thought, as he watched her toned body cross the hotel lobby towards him.

And besides, she had been a great finisher as a centre-forward.

She kissed both his cheeks, then sat down, leaving a lingering scent of expensive perfume.

They were both experienced players in this game. George knew what she wrote carried weight with the American opinion formers who would be so important to the new Scotland and had expended no little effort wooing her over long lunches in London.

Jessica knew that George and Scotland's first minister Ross Johnson had been friends since their university days thirty years before and that therefore he spoke with the full authority of his boss, unlike so many other arrogant and overpaid 'spin doctors' in the other parties, who hinted at access they never truly enjoyed.

As important, George had studied and worked in the States and shared none of the juvenile anti-Americanism so common in the United Kingdom. Jessica liked the adage that the relationship between a journalist and a politician should be akin to that of a dog and a lamp post, but she knew the reality was more complex. She really enjoyed the intellectual flirtation with George.

And besides, George had been the nicest high-school history teacher she had ever had. 'So, my dear George, how does the first day of freedom feel?'

'Wonderful,' George replied. Then he added with a smile, 'Obviously, I never doubted for a moment it would happen.'

Jessica snorted at the obvious fib. Unabashed, George took a sip of coffee and continued. 'So, how do you want to begin? On or off the record?'

Jessica laughed and tossed back her long brown hair. 'Off, of course. But tell me first, how is that lovely young girlfriend of yours?'

*SHEREMETYEVO INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, MOSCOW, 11 A.M.*

Colonel Karimov settled back in his seat on the flight to London and tried to focus on the editorials in *The Economist*, but his mind kept drifting to the task ahead. Russia had come so far since the dark, desperate days of Yeltsin's presidency when the nation he loved had been reduced to an international laughing stock: an impoverished banana republic presided over by a drunken oaf.

Driven by Vladimir Putin's steely determination and fuelled by record oil and gas prices, Russia had slowly clawed its way back to power and respectability. Now, this surprise referendum result in a tiny, unimportant country had finally given Russia the chance to become the equal of America for the first time since the Cold War ended in the 1980s.

And he was the man who was going to make it happen: a player at last. He finally had a chance to expel the nightmare of East Germany from his mind for ever. It was a chance he would not allow to slip.

*BBC BROADCASTING HOUSE, LANGHAM PLACE, LONDON, 8 P.M.*

The BBC had grumpily assented to a live prime-ministerial broadcast with much muttering about editorial integrity and the need for the leader of the opposition to have a right to reply. But Nick Jones had been correct: the arm-twisting on the licence fee had ultimately worked.

As he polished his spectacles, the prime minister looked round the bare walls of tiny Studio C, empty apart from a single cameraman and a floor manager. It seemed an oddly inauspicious setting for such a historic announcement.

Jones disliked live TV, but he couldn't deny that it got the adrenalin pumping. And he knew he was a lot better at

giving speeches than he was in the brutal cut and thrust of TV debate.

The floor manager started the countdown at ten. Nick Jones took one last sip of water, moistened his lips and turned his focus to the autocue in front of him.

‘Three, two, one . . .’

The light on the wall glowed red, accentuating the black letters spelling out ‘Microphone Live’.

‘My fellow citizens, as you will all now be aware, last night the people of Scotland voted to leave the United Kingdom. It is true that the margin was incredibly close, fewer than 2,000 voters in the end. However, in a democracy, a winning margin of one is sufficient and I fully respect that decision.

‘The question the Scots said “Yes” to was unambiguous. They agreed that the Scottish Parliament should negotiate a new settlement with the British government so that Scotland becomes a sovereign and independent state. I have today spoken to the king and can announce that my government will not put obstacles in the way of Scotland as it seeks that independent future. We will work towards a painless “velvet” divorce, as the Czechs and Slovaks managed in the early 1990s and the Flemish and French-speaking parts of Belgium achieved last year. I believe that, with goodwill on all sides, that objective can be successfully achieved.

‘However, I will not countenance these negotiations being protracted and potentially destabilising. Our respective civil servants in the Constitution Unit in Edinburgh have already drawn up fairly advanced plans in the White Paper and these will be implemented quickly. As of midnight on the thirty-first of July this year, Scotland will be a fully sovereign nation, taking full responsibility for its own economy, foreign affairs and defence. A Scottish pound will neither be tied to, nor supported by, the Bank of England. Also, a process of military disengagement will commence with immediate

effect, beginning with the withdrawal of the nuclear submarine fleet from the Royal Navy base at Faslane.

'I wish the people of Scotland well, but I must say that I hope and expect that, freed from the drag of subsidies to Scotland, the people of England, Wales and Northern Ireland will continue to progress and I look forward to leading them to further prosperity. Thank you for taking the time to listen. Goodnight.'

Tony Hodge walked down from the studio gallery and joined his boss in makeup as he wiped off the last of the foundation. 'Very positive and direct, Nick. That should put the wind up the Jocks. Our people in Edinburgh are saying that they are already getting cold feet and would probably settle for a federal solution. I could speak to George Wallace about a conference at . . .'

The prime minister stood up and closed the door. 'Don't you get it, Tony? This is not a bluff. I mean it. I was always a Unionist. I always thought of myself as British, but these people have chosen to make me English. Well, so be it. And it's unquestionably in our political interests. Even when Blair won the election comfortably in 2005, the Tories won the popular vote in England. By removing Scottish MPs I have just guaranteed a Conservative government in England for the next fifty years. Not even your heroine Mrs Thatcher could do that.'

Tony Hodge was taken aback by his boss's sudden, out-of-character passion. 'But what about our support for the Scottish Unionists? What'll happen to them?'

'Let the brightest and best come south, and tough for the rest. Their unsettling presence in Scotland will mean the SNP will have to focus inwards and thus be less demanding on us.'

Nick Jones remembered an appropriate phrase from that morning. 'It's just politics, Tony, nothing personal.'

*THE IRON DUKE BAR, DENNISTOUN, GLASGOW, 8.10 P.M.*

As the prime minister's address ended, Sammy Wilson slammed down his pint glass on the scratched and sticky table in disgust. 'Well, that's us fucked, then. Another fucking sell-out. First Ulster, now us.' He turned his shaven head from the television screen to his five drinking companions. 'Boys, it's time for us to get active again. This is our last chance to save Britain. Remember our oath of "No Surrender"? Well, it's time to live up to that. Are you wi' me?' he demanded.

Sammy's five mates looked at his cold killer's eyes and the long scar that disfigured his face, and nodded their assent one by one.

Sammy wasn't the kind of man you disagreed with lightly.

*KNOCKAVIE HOUSE, STIRLINGSHIRE, 8.10 P.M.*

Robert Cowan switched off the television and turned to face the twenty stony-faced senior financiers, politicians and entrepreneurs in his drawing room. He surveyed the dinner-jacketed men clutching their pre-dinner gin and tonics. This planned victory party for the 'No' campaign had turned into a wake.

But Cowan had a surprise for them. He knew this was the moment to seize the initiative - the moment to show he could lead from the front. 'Gentlemen, you have heard the prime minister. Though hardly surprising, it is nevertheless deeply disappointing to hear this message of surrender from a man who promised us his full support in this very room just a year ago. We have been abandoned by the British Conservative Party.'

Scotland's business elite murmured their agreement. 'However, we are where we are, and the defence of the Union now falls on our shoulders - and wallets. Some, of course, more ample than others.'

He waited for the laughter to subside, then grew serious. 'The "Yes" vote was unquestionably a devastating blow. Our

beloved nation faces the greatest peril since the Battle of Britain in 1940. As we did then, we must stand firm. We cannot allow three hundred years of glorious history to be tossed aside on the basis of one snapshot poll. Therefore, I suggest tonight that we put aside our sadness and disappointment and rededicate ourselves to the task. I propose that we establish a political movement to fight for Unionism the way that the spineless Labour Party, Liberal Democrats and Conservatives have singularly failed to do. I believe we should call ourselves the Scottish Unionist Resistance, and then do what it says on the tin and defend our nation.'

Cowan relished the growing excitement in the room. 'Gentlemen, I ask you to raise your glasses to toast the birth of the Scottish Unionist Resistance. The SUR!'

'The SUR!' chorused twenty voices in unison.

A satisfied smile crossed Cowan's face. 'Now, if you would like to head through, dinner is served. We have much to discuss.'

*THE BALMORAL HOTEL, EDINBURGH, 8.10 P.M.*

As Prime Minister Jones finished his last sentence, Colonel Karimov switched off the television set in his hotel room. He was going to have to move faster than anticipated. Three months from a vote for independence to a complete severing of the two nations was less than a quarter of the time anticipated in Operation Braveheart's blueprint. He would need to see Ross Johnson as soon as possible.

In the hotel bar below, George Wallace punched Clare's number on his speed dial. 'Did you see the broadcast, sweetheart? Yes, I thought you might be watching. Three months will be really punishing. I'm afraid our celebration dinner is going to have to wait. I'm off to see Ross to discuss what this means. Don't wait up, I'll try to be quiet when I come in.'

As he hurried out to the taxi rank, George felt a wave of tenderness toward Clare. Her love and tolerance made all of this bearable. Then a stab of tiredness made him realise that this was likely to be another sleepless night spent with political apparatchiks instead of in Clare's sweet embrace.

Not for the first time that day, in spite of his elation at the referendum result, George felt just a little sorry for himself.

*THE SITUATION ROOM, THE WHITE HOUSE, 4.10 P.M.*

As President MacFarlane entered the room, the political and military elite of the United States rose as one to their feet. He waved them to sit. 'Gentlemen. Sorry, lady and gentlemen. The prime minister's decision to accelerate the road to Scottish independence raises some interesting issues for us. A situation report, please. Military first. Carl?'

The head of the joint chiefs of staff, Admiral Carl Butterworth, cleared his throat. 'The most immediate issue is the nuclear base at Faslane on the Gare Loch in western Scotland, where our new nuclear missiles are on Royal Navy subs. That is not hardware we want to be sharing with anyone but London. Working with the English government, we will have those out within the month.

'We have the fast reactive Marine battalion based at RAF Forres near Inverness, but that can be easily shifted to England. Then, of course, there are Special Operations forces which don't appear in the official number. I reckon no more than a hundred across Scotland. Militarily, the situation is difficult, but by no means insurmountable.'

'Politics, Chuck?'

Charles Sands, the White House chief of staff, had never had the nerve to tell his boss how much he hated that abbreviation of his name, which reminded him of years of abuse at his prep school at Andover at the hands of pupils less academically gifted than himself. However, at least when the president called him Chuck he felt less of what he

in reality was - the only East Coast intellectual in an administration of Southern populists.

Sands was his usual crisp self; he knew how much his boss hated unnecessary waffle. 'The SNP is a mainstream political party and leader Ross Johnson a convinced social democrat. The only political danger is a Unionist backlash, given the tightness of the vote, and thus the potential for some form of civil disorder, but I reckon that is remote. There's no tradition of violent protest in modern Scottish history.

'The SNP is committed to removing nuclear weapons from Scotland and is traditionally pretty hostile to America. However, Johnson's senior special adviser - effectively his chief of staff - is a guy called George Wallace, and he's friendly to the United States. He and Johnson are the tightest pair in British politics since Tony Blair and Alastair Campbell. Wallace studied at Penn and worked in LA. He should be our entry point for exercising some influence.'

Sands looked pointedly at the director of the CIA, as if inviting a challenge. 'I think it is time for a charm offensive. My team is already on it.'

'Intelligence?'

Jane Chalmers, the director of the CIA, shifted uncomfortably in her seat. As the president's awkward introduction had illustrated, it was a tough enough job to be the first ever female director of the Agency, without presiding over yet another intelligence failure. 'Well, Mr President, I'm afraid we clearly called this one wrong. All our analysts thought the Unionists would win comfortably, so we are playing catch-up here. We have no agents inside the SNP hierarchy, though I understand MI6 does have one who is well placed.'

Chalmers then played a card which she hoped would take the attention off her Agency's mistake. 'However, I don't agree with Charles that the most pressing issue is the

danger of civil disorder in Scotland. For me, the real big issue is what the Russians do.'

Chalmers was aware that she suddenly had the undivided attention of a dozen pairs of eyes. She chose her next words carefully. 'Under President Churov, the Russians have returned to the hardline policies of the Putin era and the Communist regimes before that, effectively seeking to restore the influence the Soviets had in Europe during the Cold War. They are furious that we have extended NATO to their borders and even angrier about our new missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic.'

'The Russians control major politicians in Hungary and the Czech Republic and have been funding separatist movements in Catalonia and Flanders in order to destabilise the European Union.'

'Any evidence they are behind the SNP?' interrupted MacFarlane.

'No, Mr President, but independence could give them an opening. And control of an independent Scotland gives power over the North Atlantic's shipping lanes.'

'OK, thank you all. Let's gear up the political and intelligence effort - and let's find some friends in the SNP. Chuck, let's get this guy Johnson over here real soon. The last thing we need is more Russian influence in Western Europe. They already control half its gas and oil supplies.'

'That's it, gentlemen. Sorry, Jane. I mean, y'all get to work.'

## CHAPTER 2

---

### **FRIDAY, 6 JUNE \_ FIFTY-FIVE DAYS TO INDEPENDENCE**

*SNP REGIONAL HEADQUARTERS, ARGYLE STREET, GLASGOW, 4 A.M.*

Sammy Wilson sat in a battered old Ford Fiesta with his brother Billy and his second cousins, Jack and Gordon Williams. He hadn't felt this excited since the Scottish brigade of the UVF - the Ulster Volunteer Force - had gone on ceasefire eight years earlier. Now he was back on active service. The head of the Glasgow East Battalion of the new British Loyalist Army. Someone again. A leader.

Sammy had been just twenty-one years old when the ceasefire had been ordered in 2006, a junior player, muscle for the leaders, but at least a part of something. Since then, he had felt his life drained of real purpose. He led the Dennistoun Young Team, the toughest Loyalist gang in Glasgow's East End - significant, but a poor substitute for the good old days of the UVF. Now he was back in the big time.

Sammy only truly felt alive when fighting. He was aware the boys followed him not because he was the biggest, or strongest, or even the best fighter, but because they feared him. He knew that the winner in a fight was always the person who could take most pain and cared least what happened to him.

If Sammy had been a little better read, he would have also known that was one of the classic signs of psychopathy.

Sixteen years living with his dad had taught him how to take pain, weekly beatings with a buckled belt, whether he deserved them or not. He had endured it until the day of his

sixteenth birthday, when he had used a baseball bat to put his dad in intensive care.

His father had never touched him again, leading Sammy to the conclusion that violence worked and absolute violence worked absolutely.

Leading his battalion of the BLA gave him a renewed reason for being – the only thing in his life of which he was remotely proud. And, most important, it made him someone on the mean streets of east Dennistoun. He hated the fact that any criminal and crackhead now got respect. It made him furious. He wasn't scum like that. He was a soldier in the king's service.

The old guys had hung up their balaclavas and he was now in charge. Like all psychopaths, Sammy saw himself as a victim and loved nothing more than feeling righteous as he inflicted violence.

Sammy also relished his physicality. He had the defiant, wiry muscularity of the classic Glasgow hard man. Running his right hand across his shaved head, he fingered the long ugly scar that Sean Kelly's hatchet had left.

He was always really pleased with his rehearsed response when people asked him about it. 'Aye, it's bad, right enough. But you should see the other guy.'

He was right. Sean Kelly was dead. Killed with his own hatchet.

Sammy looked down at the mobile phone and carefully punched in four digits. The blast ripped the door off its hinges and sent shards of glass cascading across the tar of the empty street.

Sammy tucked the mobile into his leather jacket and gunned the car into action. 'Good practice, lads. I think we're ready for bigger things,' he said to his companions.

The others nodded. But Gordon Williams kept his eyes fixed on the glass reflecting in the orange glow of the street lamps.

*OFFICE OF THE SENIOR SPECIAL ADVISER, SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT, EDINBURGH, 7 A.M.*

George Wallace's head lay still on his desk. He was fast asleep.

He was woken by his PA, Morven, rapping her knuckles on the glass door. She carried a steaming and very welcome cup of coffee. 'Morning, George. Thought you might need this. By the way, another bomb in Glasgow this morning. That's the fourth this week.'

George stretched and rubbed his eyes. He had always considered himself a hard worker - a fit, energetic man. He had been an exceptionally diligent student, attending lectures while others propped up the bar. He had built up and sold a successful public relations company, spending late Friday nights trying to spike stories about his clients in the Sunday papers and late Sunday nights struggling to work out the VAT in an old pencil ledger.

Returning to his first love of politics in his mid forties, he had revelled in the 24/7 news cycle, the addiction, the sheer exhilaration of being in government keeping him going.

But nothing, *nothing* had prepared him for the last month. The intensity of negotiating the unravelling of a major nation in the full glare of the world's media had drained him to the core.

When he had had two kids under two, George used to joke that people without sleepless infants should be banned from using the word 'exhausted'. But this was worse even than that.

The negotiations had been excruciating. The English side held all the trump cards and hadn't been slow to let their Scottish counterparts see the brutal side of power politics. What couldn't be agreed was imposed.

And how could the Scots respond? As one of his English opponents put it to him: 'What are you going to do, George? Invade Carlisle?'

On top of the constant pressure of the independence negotiations, every day brought a steady stream of bad news. In a major public-service brain drain, many senior civil servants and military personnel had already voted with their feet and headed south, wanting nothing to do with the new Scotland, their insistent complaints filling the newspapers and the airwaves.

Almost immediately, the opinion polls suggested that the Scottish people regretted the choice of independence. Post-referendum surveys showed that many Scots had voted 'Yes' to put pressure on the Westminster government to give Scotland more powers, or just to show their disgust at the UK Conservative government which had been elected in 2010, expecting that other voters would produce a 'No' vote overall.

The result had been a complete shock.

The poll in that morning's *Scotsman* showed that, four weeks after the vote, only 35 per cent were now in favour of independence, with 65 per cent opposed.

The economic news was even worse. Part of George's role in the party had been to liaise with the business community and he had worked hard to bring many over to the cause of independence, especially after the credit crunch of 2008 had wrecked Scottish banking.

Now that independence was a reality, the hard core of refuseniks were making good their promise to take the first shuttle down to London and making very public their disdain for the new Scotland and its economic prospects. Those that remained were pouring money into the nascent Scottish Unionist Resistance.

This flight of capital and talent was in danger of making their dire predictions of economic collapse a self-fulfilling prophecy as it further rocked Scottish confidence. In just a month's time the new Scottish pound would float on the world's markets and potential disaster loomed.

The Scots' cold feet were now getting positively icy.

Of course, the opposition were making his life hellish. Despite only being a month old, the SUR were winning support from across the political spectrum. The rump of the Scottish Conservatives had joined en masse, as had disaffected members of the Labour Party, who felt their leadership had been less than robust in its defence of the Union and hated their party's acceptance of the inevitability of independence.

Most worryingly, an organisation calling itself the British Loyalist Army - or BLA - had embarked on a series of low-level acts of terrorism against the very idea of an independent Scotland. There had been nothing serious yet: a couple of letter bombs to left-wing members of the SNP; blasts in the middle of the night with no casualties. So far.

The SUR leader Robert Cowan had condemned them, following up with the usual 'but you have to understand the frustration of young men in difficult circumstances' bollocks. It reeked of hypocrisy.

Both the SUR and the BLA had been able to rally people round the Scottish government's decision not to have the king remain as head of state in Scotland. How George cursed the republican left of the SNP for pushing through a meaningless gesture which had alienated many people in Scotland just when they needed friends the most.

This was one of the actions that fuelled George's deepest and most secret fear, one he had so far only dared to share with his girlfriend Clare. What if independence wasn't the best option, after all? Maybe it was all a big mistake that would condemn Scotland to impoverishment and political irrelevance.

Christ, if *he* was starting to think like that, what hope was there for everyone else?

George's reverie was broken by Morven popping her head round the door. 'Remember, you have the first minister in five. And the White House chief of staff's office would like an

advance copy of your American speech. Do you have it on the laptop so I can email it?’

George muttered his assent and went to freshen up. He splashed his face in the staff bathroom, the cold water cutting the tiredness from his eyes. He stared intently at the mirror.

Not bad for forty-nine, he mused, surveying a greying but full head of dark brown hair and only the slightest swell of a beer belly. Though he never discussed it, George took a secret pleasure in having aged so well and was quietly horrified at his rotund peers in the parliament building. He loved the physical challenge of sport almost as much as he loved the intellectual challenge of history and poetry.

He still had the classic male V-shape, broad shoulders and thin waist, accentuated by his single extravagance since he had made some money: beautifully cut, bespoke suits from the little Italian tailor on the south side of Glasgow.

George had kept himself fit playing amateur football with Dennistoun Villa until he had left Glasgow three years before and he still played five-a-sides twice a week in an MSPs-against-advisers match, topping it up with stress-busting visits to the gym.

His pleasant, regular features were spoiled by a nose broken by an over-eager centre-half during a particularly brutal game of football, and which now appeared to be trying to colonise the rest of his face.

A distinctive anger vein ran down his right temple. It pulsed disconcertingly when he was furious, which was more often than was healthy for him. And now, of course, he had massive greyish bags under his intelligent dark brown eyes.

George knew he needed to harness all his energy and acumen to steel himself once more for the stressful day ahead.

*OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER, SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT,  
EDINBURGH, 7.30 A.M.*

As he sat in Ross Johnson's outer office, George reflected on the twisted path that had brought them together. They had been students together at the University of Glasgow in the mid 1980s, at the high point of Thatcherism. They had been rival debaters in the old University Union - Ross, the charismatic opener for the student nationalists; George, the tenacious closing debater for the socialists.

They had bonded over heroic drinking sessions and had stayed friends since, despite their political and personal differences. Ross was a glamorous, commitment-phobic womaniser; George, more cautious and hardworking. Ross was an expansive but slipshod thinker; George, a logical pedant with a passion for detail. Though neither was classically handsome, both had been big social and intellectual presences on campus.

Like many modern politicians, Ross Johnson had never really had a proper job. After student politics, he had taken various research roles in the party. He had won a Westminster seat for the SNP at a by-election in his mid thirties and had progressed rapidly up the ranks of a party short on glamour.

Over the years, George had admired Ross's unfailing capacity to work a room.

He was equally at ease with charladies and chairmen, and shared with Bill Clinton the invaluable ability to make whoever he was speaking to at the time feel he or she was the most important person in the world to him. Ross knew as a politician that if people liked you, they would forgive you anything; if they disliked you, they would forgive you nothing.

And people definitely liked Ross. Unlike George, they had not seen that his charm could be switched on and off at will, or witnessed the cold wind of his disapproval.

Disillusioned with New Labour from the start of the century, George had grown closer to Ross politically over the years. Working in the PR business in London, he had seen at first hand how little Scotland mattered to the capital's press and power brokers. He had slowly become convinced that Scotland would only prosper as an independent nation, a feeling Ross had encouraged over late-night whiskies when they met on the sleeper north.

Like many male friendships, theirs made few demands. Neither felt the need to nurture it or, indeed, examine it in any way. They met once every few weeks for dinner, played the odd game of poor golf and travelled to Scotland football games together. They talked sport and Ross offered political insight in return for media gossip. For George, their ties had become looser, but deeper, as they had grown older. They didn't need to work on their friendship. It just was. And every time they met, they seamlessly picked up where they had left off.

When Ross became first minister after the 2011 Scottish election, he had shocked George by asking him to come to work for him as his senior special adviser, flattering him by saying he needed someone who would tell him the truth, not a party hack who would tell him what he wanted to hear.

In all honesty, George hadn't needed much persuasion. His wife, Bridget, had died two years before, he had sold his PR company and was itching for a new challenge. After years of explaining and defending the actions of others, it was so tempting for him to be able to make decisions that actually made a difference. To be a doer, not a viewer. To be an insider. Finally, a player.

Ross's clinching argument over a fine Arran malt was to remind George that he had a chance to overcome Schopenhauer's observation that the first forty years of life were text and the rest commentary. George had said yes that same night. He had never regretted that decision.

Though it was not an elected post, everyone knew the power that George wielded. He was Ross's eyes and ears in the party. He controlled access to him. He had his attention night and day.

George knew that many in the SNP resented this position, particularly as he had been in the Labour Party for years and hadn't suffered with the party faithful through the decades in the wilderness. This was compounded when *The Scotsman* named him the second most powerful man in Scotland after the first minister. George knew that was rubbish, the product of lazy journalism – an obsession with lists instead of writing proper analysis – and no more a compliment than being the second-best downhill skier in Jamaica.

He was also aware that he lacked an independent power base in the party, which meant that his future was completely tied to that of his boss. And Ross liked that. George's dependence guaranteed his absolute loyalty, a rare quality in politics.

Of course, George sometimes idly wondered if it could have been him at the top instead of Ross, but he knew he could have no real regrets. He had two great kids, money in the bank, the house in the Algarve, and now Clare. He would still have a life if this all fell apart. And he knew that, one day, it all would. All political careers do.

Ross, by contrast, had nothing but politics. He was married only to the party. He had spent the best years of his life doing the 'rubber chicken' circuit of dinners with local party branches to shore up his position, trailing a series of increasingly short sexual relationships in his wake. George admired lots of things about Ross, but found it hard to envy him.

George had also realised in the last three years, as he watched Ross defeat rivals and friends in equal measure, that he didn't have the requisite ruthlessness, the constant cynicism, that winning at politics requires.