

## Chapter 4 - A Blizzard of Attacks

The BBC's coverage of the Megrahi issue was essentially a conveyor belt of attacks on Kenny MacAskill's decision. It convinced many that the corporation was operating an agenda aimed at eroding public confidence in the SNP administration. The BBC's coverage of domestic Scottish news throughout this period was no different and stories that were unhelpful to the Scottish government were regularly headlined. But with some BBC Scotland news reports, seeing was not always believing.

On November 24th 2010, a debate took place in the Holyrood chamber. The debate followed news that the Scottish Parliament's income tax powers had been allowed to lapse. Following the debate, Finance Secretary John Swinney issued an apology over his failure to properly inform the Parliament of the situation. That evening Reporting Scotland ran a news item in which they showed a clip from the debate. The video appeared to show First Minister Alex Salmond acting in a flippant manner as Swinney delivered his apology.

In the clip shown on Reporting Scotland, the camera initially focused on the Finance Secretary who was heard to say:

*"I express my regret to parliament that in retrospect I clearly did not get all those judgements correct."*

The video then immediately cut away to Mr Salmond who was shown shaking his head in an almost flippant manner whilst feigning a nonchalant 'ooohhh' in mock concern. The camera then cut back to an apparently forlorn looking Finance Secretary. To most casual viewers it appeared as though the First Minister hadn't treated the apology seriously.



It was a very odd thing for Alex Salmond to have done. So much so that a Newsnet Scotland researcher reviewed the session on the Scottish Parliament's own official video. Fast forwarding to the moment of Swinney's statement, he noticed a key difference between the official video and the clip that had been broadcast by BBC Scotland.

The official Holyrood video showed Mr Salmond sitting in respectful silence as John Swinney read out his statement - there was no shaking of the head, no casual mockery. The researcher discovered the head shaking moment had taken place, not when Swinney had been speaking, as the BBC had suggested, but during *another* part of the session. The First Minister had in fact been reacting to a verbal tirade launched against him by Lib Dem MSP Tavish Scott.

It was Scott's rant and not Swinney's statement Alex Salmond had been mocking. In the Holyrood video John Swinney could clearly be seen sitting next to Mr Salmond as Tavish Scott launched his angry attack. As can be seen in the image, both men are looking at the Lib Dem MSP. The Holyrood camera then homed in on Salmond reacting to Scott.



BBC Scotland had cut the clip, inserted it into their recording of John Swinney, and broadcast the edited footage as a single continuous sequence, giving a totally misleading version of events. Only by viewing the *actual* footage supplied by Holyrood cameras was the chicanery of the BBC exposed and a quite blatant example of video manipulation laid bare.

Newsnet Scotland published an article exposing the charade. However, despite the very clear evidence of video manipulation, the BBC refused to accept any wrongdoing. Complaints from viewers, angry at what they believed was an attempt to mislead, were dismissed.

## **White Monday**

Few people will forget Monday December 6<sup>th</sup> 2010 when snow hit the Scottish Central Belt and motorists were stuck in their cars, some overnight. The weather front that hit just before the morning rush hour was unprecedented. It caused chaos as lorries jack-knifed and commuter traffic ground to a halt.

The corridor between Glasgow and Edinburgh was blanketed by thick snow as emergency services struggled to cope. Snow almost a foot deep lay on the M8 as motorists waited for assistance. The blades of snowploughs broke due to the extreme cold and gritters got stuck as the salted grit was rendered ineffective. People living adjacent to the motorway gave stranded motorists hot drinks and food. It was like a scene from a disaster movie.

Speaking afterwards, Transport Minister Stewart Stevenson, said:

*“Scotland has been in the grip of the worst snow and ice conditions in the early winter since the 1960s. Every effort has been made to keep disruption to a minimum. Snow was predicted for today but was significantly heavier than expected, and timing during rush hour made conditions worse.”*

The forecasts had predicted two to five centimetres of snow. When the blizzard had passed it had deposited up to eight times the expected amount in places. By the time authorities realised the severity of the blizzard it was too late, the M8 was packed with rush hour traffic. Motorists were angry. The public were looking for answers. Why had this been allowed to happen?

Twenty four hours after the freak event and with emergency services still struggling to bring any kind of normality back to the Central Belt, one person questioned whether the Scottish Transport Minister Stewart Stevenson should consider his position. The question didn't come from any of Mr Stevenson's political opponents. It didn't come from Labour, the Conservatives or the Lib Dems. It came from BBC Scotland presenter Gary Robertson who in an interview with the Transport Minister on the morning of December 7<sup>th</sup> said:

*“Minister, we heard from some people saying that they believed that heads should roll as a result of this. Given your admission that your department was caught off guard here have you considered your position?”*

The question came at the end of an interview in which the MSP had been subjected to a particularly aggressive accusatory 'grilling'. Stevenson had appeared on the BBC radio programme Good Morning Scotland. He was interviewed by Gary Robertson and co-host Aileen Clarke. Both confronted the MSP in a highly unusual way, with each presenter taking it in turns to challenge the Transport Minister after he had questioned the accuracy of BBC weather forecasts.

It all stemmed from an interview on Newsnight Scotland the previous evening where the Transport Minister had faced Robertson and Clarke's BBC colleague Raymond Buchanan. Buchanan had conducted a rather unfortunate interview, repeatedly asking Stevenson if he wished to apologise for the horrendous experiences endured by motorists.

Neither man emerged from the interview with credit. Buchanan appeared to be seeking a headline rather than trying to elicit helpful information from the minister. Stevenson himself blundered by omitting to issue an unreserved apology to motorists. However it was Stevenson's description of the weather as 'unforecast' that was picked up by the BBC morning radio team, and they were clearly in no mood to accept the corporation had made any mistakes.

The previous day's broadcast news had been dominated by the travel chaos and the motorists who had sat in their cars for hours. Until Stevenson's interview at 11 pm that evening, the weather forecasts hadn't been thought an issue. By the time Stevenson appeared on Good Morning Scotland to be interviewed by Gary Robertson and Aileen Clark, BBC Scotland had clearly decided the accuracy of its weather forecasts was not to be questioned.

The radio programme had already primed listeners by replaying recordings from the Buchanan interview the night before. Just before Stevenson's radio appearance, a short clip of the TV interview was played.

Listeners heard Stewart Stevenson say:

*"The snowfall happened at the worst time of day, unforecast, during the commute. We would ideally have been providing advice for people if we'd known this was the kind of weather, not to travel on our roads unless absolutely necessary and we would of course get the gritters and the snowploughs in place clearing the roads much earlier.*

*But I think we've made every effort we can in the face of unforecast and extreme weather."*

Gary Robertson then paraphrased the Transport minister's TV interview, telling listeners:

*"The minister saying there, had they known the snow was coming, things would have been different."*

Robertson then asked BBC Scotland weather-reporter Gail McGrain to comment. The weather-reporter responded, saying:

*"To say that the snow was not forecast, that's just simply inaccurate."*

And she was correct. Anybody who said that no snow had been forecast would indeed have been wrong. But this was not what Stevenson had said. Stewart Stevenson, in the TV interview, had made it clear that it was the *extent* and *severity* of the snowfall that had not been forecast, not that there had been *no* snow forecast.

Stevenson had very clearly spoken of an:

*"Unexpectedly high snowfall much wider spread than forecast..."*

Stewart Stevenson and every local authority in the Central Belt *knew* that snow was coming. What they weren't prepared for was the *amount* of snow that eventually fell.

For Gary Robertson to suggest that Stewart Stevenson claimed that he did not know that *any* snow was coming was an appalling misrepresentation and one that would have unfortunate repercussions for Stewart Stevenson.

BBC Scotland had seemed to take fright at the chaos caused by the snow. For a brief moment it appeared that people might start asking awkward questions of its weather forecasts. The forecasts had been so generic that pretty much the whole of the Central Belt had felt comfortable getting into their cars and heading off to work. Even BBC Scotland reporters had set off in cars from as far away as Dunblane to travel to Glasgow.

The radio interview was the start of a propaganda war against Stewart Stevenson. The SNP MSP, by questioning the forecasts, had effectively questioned the competence of the BBC. With the accuracy of its forecasts coming to the fore, the corporation turned on Stevenson and made *him* the news.

The BBC narrative was to be based on one key line, which was that the Transport Minister had not prepared for weather that had been accurately forecast by the corporation itself. Within hours of the Good Morning Scotland interview, opposition politicians seized on the opportunity to attack the SNP.



Stevenson was under considerable pressure. The Transport Minister was not without his faults. He had waited until late Monday afternoon before appearing on the news to give updates. Many felt he hadn't quite grasped the seriousness of the situation as early as he should have. Responding to the attacks, Stevenson issued a statement accepting responsibility for poor communication.

*“The fact of the matter is, that when the transport system grinds to a halt and people are forced to spend the night in their cars, then something has clearly gone wrong.*

*I regret this and apologise for the failure to communicate the situation effectively to the many people affected on Monday when the extent of the problem became apparent.”*

The apology led to more headlines on BBC Scotland.



But an apology wouldn't be enough. Newspapers had picked up the BBC line that forecasts had been accurate and Stevenson had been well warned. The BBC was now setting the political agenda. When opposition MSPs threatened a vote of No Confidence in the Transport Minister, Stevenson had no option but to resign. If Stevenson had remained in position and lost the confidence vote it could have led to the SNP administration collapsing.



BBC Scotland had played a key role in Stevenson's resignation. Its 'accurate forecast' line had been repeated by Unionist politicians in the Holyrood chamber. One Conservative MSP even held up an image of a BBC weather forecast during a debate. Few cared or even recalled that the first person to suggest Stevenson should consider his position was a BBC Scotland presenter. Even fewer questioned the BBC's claim that its weather forecasts had been accurate.

But *had* the BBC weather forecasts been accurate? What *exactly* had been forecast?

Newsnet Scotland acquired and published several of the BBC forecasts. The first was from a broadcast at 10pm on Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> December, the second was from a broadcast at 6.08 am on the morning of the blizzard and the last from a broadcast at 7:15 am that same morning. What did they show?

The relevant parts of each broadcast are transcribed below, with key sections in bold:

Radio Scotland forecast 10pm Sunday 5th December [Evening before the blizzard]:

*“A band of frequent sleet and snow showers across the north and the north west highlands will spread south and east overnight. **Around one or two centimetres of snow is likely at low levels but perhaps ten centimetres over the hills.** It's cold with temperatures around minus three Celcius, but could drop as low as minus ten Celcius in rural parts. The band of snow showers will be close to the Central Belt at dawn and edge south through the morning.”*

Radio Scotland forecast 06:08am Monday 06th December:

*“...a very frosty start, we've got Met office weather warnings in force for a widespread risk of ice on untreated roads and further snow to come for some of us today. Now wintery showers will continue to affect the north west highlands and the northern isles, some of those will be heavy giving further significant accumulations. And we've got a band of more persistent sleet and snow pushing across Argyll, Stirlingshire, Fife and the Central Belt during this morning. Now it'll give **another five centimetres or so for many parts, as much as ten centimetres of fresh snowfall over the hills.**”*

Met Office spokesman on Radio Scotland at 07:15am Monday 06th December:

*“We've got a band of snow, at the moment it's lying Argyll, Stirlingshire across into Fife and that's just about edging into the Glasgow and Edinburgh areas as we speak. And I think through the morning the Central Belt especially will see kind of outbreaks of snow through the morning, perhaps a little bit sleety towards western coasts. But that could give **some accumulations of two to five centimetres, perhaps locally ten centimetres I think that will be especially over the hills.** Perhaps towards **the eastern side of the Central Belt a little bit less there, one to three centimetres.**”*

It's clear from the transcripts that a maximum of five centimetres was forecast for most of the Central Belt, with ten centimetres over the hills. So how much snowfall actually fell?

The Herald newspaper on Tuesday December 7<sup>th</sup> reported the following:

*The Met Office said there was between four to 16 inches (ten to 40cm) of lying snow in the central lowlands, more than 1ft (32cm) in Edinburgh and 4 inches (11cm) in Glasgow*

The BBC had been forecasting a maximum of 5cm in the Central Belt. Yet the Met Office confirmed that the range of snowfall had been as much as eight times that figure. In the Airdie/Coatbridge area which sits between Edinburgh and Glasgow, and is right next to the M8 motorway, the snow was over 12 inches deep - six times the BBC forecast.

There's little doubt that the BBC weather forecasts were not accurate. In fact the recordings from which the transcripts above are taken reveal no sense of urgency from the news-readers and forecasters. There was no suggestion that people should not travel. The forecasts were *partially* accurate in that they predicted snowfall, but to say that the BBC had forecast the *severity* of the snowfall is like saying 'heavy showers' would have accurately described Noah's floods.

The severity of the blizzard caught everyone by surprise, from members of the public who headed to work in their cars, to Transport Scotland chiefs and Local Authority Officials who had all planned for a maximum of 5cm of snow. Transport Minister Stewart Stevenson would have had no reason to think that the snowfall was going to be significantly worse than had been experienced the previous week.

The public had a right to know that the emergency services had prepared for one set of conditions, only to be confronted by something far, far worse. Of course there would still be questions to answer and Stevenson did indeed have explaining to do over the lack of communication. But the BBC and the Met office also had questions to answer. Why had they missed the extent of the snowfall and why had the Met office not issued a red alert warning, instead of the lesser amber/orange?

But some journalists and members of the public *had indeed* started to question the weather forecast accuracy. Some daily newspapers on the morning after the blizzard had already gone to print before the BBC started to promote its own version.

The Herald reported:

*Thousands of people were stranded yesterday after the **heavier-than-expected snowfall** brought much of the country's transport network to a complete standstill.*

*Up to 40cm of snow fell in just a few hours, leaving workers trapped miles away from their homes and pupils and teachers stuck inside schools.*

Similar articles appeared in other outlets, including the Scotsman newspaper which claimed forecasters had predicted only 'fairly light showers'.

The Scotsman reported:

***The Met Office has come under fire for failing to predict the scale of the snowstorm that hit the Central Belt, as schools were closed just hours after opening and the army was brought in to take patients to hospitals.***

*Forecasters had issued Scotland with an "orange" level warning on Sunday night - saying only that the country should "be prepared" for wintry weather. **Experts had predicted fairly light snow showers, which would move across Edinburgh, Glasgow and the Lothians during the afternoon.***

The Scotsman newspaper also quoted Greg Miller, a crane firm sales manager:

*"I arrived at the airport at 7am in a bit of a blizzard, but by the time I reached the departure lounge you could not see the runway. **There had been no forecast of snow and the sheer volume surprised me – so much fell in such a short space of time.**"*

The Herald had described what hit the M8 as a blizzard. The Scotsman called it a perfect storm.



## Chaos on Scotland's roads as blizzards batter country

Tuesday 7 December 2010

## Scotland's weather: Cities grind to a halt as perfect storm descends

So, initial newspaper reports were already questioning the accuracy of weather forecasts. They were at one with Stewart Stevenson. But what's important to note is that the articles were drafted before Stevenson himself made the same point and also before the BBC line emerged.

An interesting point about the early newspaper reports is that they were devoid of any hint of political opportunism. Until Gary Robertson asked if the Transport minister had considered his position, nobody had mentioned it, not even the Scottish Labour party, usually eager to grab any opportunity to call for a ministerial resignation. Central Scotland had experienced an unprecedented weather event, the severity of which had not been expected. Most people realised that nothing could have prepared the emergency services for what eventually transpired.

The failure of the Met and BBC to accurately forecast the severity of the blizzard was also highlighted by the leader of local authority umbrella group COSLA. Pat Watters was a Labour Councillor and was being interviewed on Good Morning Scotland by Aileen Clarke the morning after the storm. The BBC Scotland presenter had earlier confronted Stewart Stevenson over the MSP's claim that forecasts had not been accurate. In the interview with Watters, Ms Clarke tried again to insist that the BBC's weather forecasts had been accurate.

The view was challenged by Watters, who replied:

*"What was forecast yesterday was light snow over central Scotland, what we didn't get was light snow over central Scotland."*

The comment from the head of COSLA appeared to unsettle Clarke, who replied:

*"Well you'll be aware I'm sure, as you're a regular listener Mr Watters, that Gail McGrain was quite clear this morning that the snow was predicted. Though she did say to be fair that Lanarkshire got a bit more than they had expected."*

*"But in general terms the snow was predicted and was predicted to hit rush hour."*

The COSLA head was having none of it though, and Watters retorted:

*"Oh yeah, it was predicted we were going to get I think it was five centimetres or something like that, between three and five centimetres was predicted. Can I say when I arrived home last night I had to dig my car INTO [emphasised] the drive."*

*"There was fourteen inches of snow on the roads yesterday."*

The head of COSLA, a Labour councillor, had publicly endorsed the view given by Stewart Stevenson. In doing so he was essentially challenging the claims emanating from the BBC.

In a statement a spokesman for Transport Scotland confirmed that a Met Office alert level had remained at orange on Sunday night, and had not gone to a red - the most serious. Echoing the remarks from Pat Watters, the spokesman also highlighted the lack of accuracy in the forecasts, saying:

*"Snowfall was forecast but the severity and duration of the sustained snowfall in Central Scotland [on Monday] morning and early afternoon was not anticipated, and we had a combination of circumstances which severely constrained the ability to clear the network,"*

Even STV weatherman Sean Batty conceded that the weather forecasts had fallen short. On STV news the day after the big freeze Batty said:

*“The Met Office did have advisories, weather warnings out appropriate to two to five centimetres of snow to fall in places, although it did fall a little bit short of the snowfall actually fell during Monday in that spell of heavy weather.”*

The BBC’s decision to publicly challenge Stewart Stevenson meant the broadcaster had entered the political arena. It had effectively created and taken sides in what was to become a political row. Scottish Labour's transport spokesman, Charlie Gordon seized on the BBC’s claims it had provided accurate forecasts:

*“It is not good enough for the SNP government to blame the weather forecast when heavy snow and ice was predicted by the BBC on Sunday night,*

*We have to ask serious questions about whether there was a failure of planning and Transport Minister Stewart Stevenson should come before parliament and explain why things went so badly wrong.”*

As the pressure on Stevenson grew, the broadcaster had begun pushing its own line more aggressively. BBC Scotland included the issue in its flagship news programme Reporting Scotland. The programme included a video clip of a BBC weather forecast from the evening before the blizzard. The BBC weatherman in the image was heard saying:

*“A new feature brings fresh snowfall just in time for the rush-hour.”*



As the camera zoomed in to give viewers a close-up of the white ‘snowfall’, a dramatic voice-over was provided by BBC Scotland reporter Raymond Buchanan. It was a classic propaganda technique. The zooming in, the melodramatic commentary and the map showing ‘snow’ created an impression or rather an illusion of an accurate forecast. But it was proof of nothing, save that the BBC had forecast snowfall. Nowhere in the clip did the weatherman indicate the severity of the weather front, nor the sheer volume of snow that was about to be deposited onto the Central Belt. In fact the clip was precisely the weather forecast Stevenson and Watters had both described - a prediction of snow with no suggestion of the magnitude of the approaching blizzard.

The truth was, like everyone else, the BBC had been caught out by the severity of the weather front that hit the Central Belt that morning. Indeed other BBC TV weather forecasts not shown on Reporting Scotland made it abundantly clear the broadcaster had underestimated the snowfall. These forecasts had been broadcast the day before the blizzard and none had suggested the approaching weather was anything remarkable. In fact only one area of the UK was singled out by the BBC for a special snowfall warning. That area was Northern Ireland. On Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> December, a BBC weatherman pointed to the weather front drifting into Scotland and told viewers:

*“This is the snow coming into northern Scotland. Could give a quick five to ten centimetres, two to four inches in places working its way south through the night.”*

He then added:

*“But it's in Northern Ireland it could well be a troublesome day. Some uncertainty, but it looks as if what starts as rain could turn over into a period of heavy snow.”*

Perhaps it was memories from the eighties when the BBC was ridiculed after weather forecaster Michael Fish famously dismissed as ‘strong winds’ the hurricane that devastated the South east of England, but BBC Scotland seemed to take fright after the blizzard rendered the Central Belt gridlocked. When the BBC decided to go after Stewart Stevenson, it was odds on that Unionist politicians and newspapers would follow suit. The newspapers quickly forgot their initial scepticism over the weather forecast accuracy.

It wouldn't have mattered who was in charge that fateful day, the weather was so sudden and extreme that stranded vehicles was inevitable. In fact within a day of the M8 grinding to a halt, the same thing happened across England with the army having to be brought in to help thousands of stranded motorists. Unlike his Scottish counterpart, the minister in charge of Transport south of the border already knew how severe the approaching weather front was. Yet there were no calls from the BBC for Philip Hammond to consider his position.

The 'White Monday' episode ended with a specially convened session of the Holyrood Transport Committee. On December 16<sup>th</sup>, ten days after the blizzard, MSPs took evidence from key parties involved in the operations that day. Included in the list of witnesses were the Chief of Police and the Chief Engineer for roads. In statements to MSPs, both acknowledged that the weather forecasts they had based their responses on that day had been wrong.

So Transport Scotland, the head of COSLA, the Met Office, the Chief of Police and the Chief Engineer for roads had all said pretty much the same thing as Stewart Stevenson. It didn't matter though. What mattered was what had been headlined.

Stewart Stevenson's resignation was the culmination of a year-long series of attacks on the SNP, and Scottish Labour was cock-a-hoop. The party had been looking for a chink in Salmond's armour since 2007. Now here, with the help of BBC Scotland, they had a significant scalp.

As we neared 2011 - Scottish election year - pundits were predicting an easy Labour victory in May's ballot. Polls in September 2010 had given Labour a ten point lead over its Nationalist rival. By November Ipsos MORI, YouGov and System3 were all showing Labour with clear leads over the SNP. With a now wounded SNP and with the Scottish media on his side, Iain Gray looked set to become First Minister.

Scottish Labour benefitted from a sympathetic media. There was nothing wrong with the press nailing its editorial colours to the mast, newspapers were private businesses and were free to pursue whatever political line they wished. However the BBC had an obligation to be impartial. But in Scotland, the circumstantial evidence of an agenda at play was overwhelming.

The New Year was to bring yet another example of BBC Scotland's special brand of political news reporting. Or to be more accurate, its non-reporting, as the corporation turned a Nelsonesque blind eye to an embarrassing and potentially damaging gaffe by Iain Gray.

## **Montenegro**

If you didn't follow Scottish politics in 2011 then the chances are you will have no idea how a small country in south-eastern Europe almost became an issue in the Scottish parliamentary election.

On December 23<sup>rd</sup> 2010, Scottish Labour leader Iain Gray - still basking in the afterglow of Stewart Stevenson's resignation - decided he wanted some icing applied to his end of year cake. Salmond was still vulnerable and the last First Minister's Questions of that year offered an opportunity of a few more helpful headlines before the year's end. Gray decided to attack the SNP's flagship policy of independence.

The SNP had cited the nation of Montenegro as an example of a peaceful and relatively effortless transition from a Union to independence. Unionists had often claimed that independence for Scotland would be a protracted affair which would result in years of acrimony between Scotland and England. But in Montenegro's case it had apparently taken a mere forty days for full independence from Serbia to be realised with both sides parting amicably.

The SNP website stated:

*“Montenegro shows us just how easy it can be to become an independent country. Forty days is all it took for Montenegro to regain her freedom. It could be Scotland next.”*

It wasn't a 'hold the front page' statement from the Nationalists and there would be little political return in it for Gray. However the Scottish Labour leader, perhaps feeling a bit overconfident after the recent political success, decided the Montenegro claim merited ridicule. His gambit though was one of idiocy. Gray decided to link the independence of Montenegro to ethnic cleansing and war crimes.

To raucous laughter from the Labour benches, Iain Gray told the Holyrood chamber that Montenegro, in order to achieve independence, had needed:

*“Forty days plus two world wars, the Balkan conflict, ethnic cleansing, a war crimes tribunal and a UN peacekeeping mission.”*

It was an extraordinary statement from the man seeking to replace Alex Salmond as First Minister of Scotland. The Scottish Labour leader appeared completely unaware of the possible diplomatic repercussions of his words. Making less than complimentary statements about other foreign nations had backfired on Labour before, and resulted in angry letters from officials. A similar response from Montenegro could result in damaging headlines and raise doubts over Gray's suitability as First Minister.

Montenegro, with a population of less than 700,000, had become an independent country after holding a referendum on 21<sup>st</sup> May 2006. The referendum was conducted under rules set by the European Commission and was monitored by five international observer missions. After the referendum the International Referendum Observation Mission praised the Montenegrins. It was, by any standards, an exemplary process of which the Montenegrins were rightly proud.

When the Montenegrins got wind of Gray's remarks they were not best pleased. On January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011 newspaper reports revealed Marijana Živković, chargé d'affaires at Montenegro's British embassy, had written to the Scottish Labour leader complaining about the comments.

In a letter to Gray, the diplomat wrote:

*“Your statement that Montenegro was involved in ‘ethnic cleansing’, including references to ‘a war crimes tribunal and a UN peacekeeping mission’, is simply incorrect.*

*The history of Montenegro is well known to those who take interest in the country, and the people of Montenegro are very proud of it. It was the only former Yugoslav republic where neither war nor devastations took place in the last decade of the 20th century.*

*Apart from the fact that there was no ethnic cleansing in the country, Montenegro also opened its doors to the refugees of all nations. At one point in 1999, refugees made up one quarter of the population of Montenegro, when - in just two days - we took in more than 100,000 Albanians from Kosovo.”*

Ms Živković concluded:

*“I remain open for any further explanations or communications to this regard and other issues of mutual interest.”*

The letter was copied to Labour leader Ed Miliband and Scotland’s First Minister Alex Salmond. Iain Gray had sparked a diplomatic row. The story appeared in the Scottish Daily Express under the headline: **Montenegro fury over Gray’s claims of ethnic cleansing**. The Scotsman reported the story under the headline: **Iain Gray urged to say sorry after ‘ethnic cleansing’ gaffe sparks diplomatic row**. The Herald headlined the story: **Diplomatic fury after Labour leader’s ethnic cleansing jibe**. STV news gave the story a high priority. In an online article it reported: **Iain Gray urged to apologise in Montenegro ‘ethnic cleansing’ row**

It was clear that this was a very big story. We were in election year and campaigning for Holyrood had already started. The row was potentially *very* damaging for Scottish Labour and Iain Gray. SNP MP and foreign affairs spokesman Angus Robertson called on Gray to apologise for his comments.

Robertson said:

*“We are used to Mr Gray not letting the facts get in the way of his rhetoric but he has now managed to let his international ignorance embarrass Scotland. That is not good enough.*

*He needs to do the decent thing and apologise to the people of Montenegro. And, he also needs to apologise to the people of Scotland for the embarrassment his gaffes have caused.”*

But one news organisation had failed to report the episode. Unlike other news outlets, BBC Scotland had made no mention of the diplomatic row in any of its news platforms. There were no online articles; there were no radio bulletins and no TV reports. The issue wasn't discussed on any current affairs programmes or raised in debates. The corporation was silent. As far as the BBC was concerned the diplomatic row wasn't happening.

In order to achieve maximum political impact, a story has to be covered by the BBC. If the broadcaster includes it in its news bulletins then there is a good chance the story will take hold. If BBC Scotland refused to report it, then there would be no lasting damage to Scottish Labour. To the dismay of many licence fee payers in Scotland, the BBC employed a complete news blackout of the diplomatic row. It was never reported.

The diplomatic repercussions of the slur had been deemed so serious that the Sunday Herald felt it appropriate to place the story on its front page. Both Scotland on Sunday and the Scotsman newspapers gave the story a prominent position as did STV. The Press and Journal also covered it and the story had even featured in some English newspapers. Yet BBC Scotland failed to mention Gray's very serious gaffe, a gaffe that threatened to embarrass Scotland itself.

But that wasn't all. Incredibly, the day after the diplomatic row story broke, BBC Scotland decided to focus on two quite banal press releases from the Scottish Labour party. One related to a claim that flu funds had been diverted to pay for the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow and another non-story related to the leasing of NHS cars. Both stories appeared to have originated from a Scottish Labour MSP, Jackie Baillie.



The Labour inspired flu item appeared on Reporting Scotland where Baillie was allowed to attack the Scottish government.

It seems barely believable, that while the rest of the Scottish media was headlining the political fallout over Iain Gray's diplomatic row, BBC Scotland's news department was headlining two politically motivated press releases from a Labour MSP. How had Baillie managed to command the BBC news agenda so effortlessly?

BBC Scotland never did report the diplomatic row on its news media. The 'news blackout' led to accusations that the state broadcaster was failing in its public duty to scrutinise fairly. There were allegations that the story had been deliberately suppressed in order to minimise damage to Labour in Scotland.

The anger intensified when online comments critical of the BBC's blackout were removed en-masse from the blog of BBC Scotland's political editor Brian Taylor. BBC Scotland finally acknowledged the diplomatic row nine days later when Iain Gray took part in a late night leaders' interview on Newsnight Scotland. Questioned by BBC Scotland reporter Isabel Fraser on the diplomatic row, the MSP for East Lothian insisted he stood by his remarks claiming that he had made a "very valid point". The story had, by then, moved on.

The refusal by the BBC to report the diplomatic row was a story in itself. BBC Scotland was the only major news outlet in Scotland to fail to report the incident. Yet nobody in the media seemed to question just why the corporation had turned a blind eye. Scottish newspapers benefitted from being featured regularly in BBC reviews. It was essentially free advertising worth tens of thousands of pounds. Was this the reason for the reluctance to pursue the broadcaster?

Whatever the reason, one thing *was* clear, the BBC Scotland news and current affairs department, under the stewardship of a former Labour party member, could choose to drop stories that were harmful to the Scottish Labour party. What was even more shocking was that it could get away with it in the full glare of a media which was already on election watch for political gaffes and blunders. Nobody could prove that BBC Scotland had erased the diplomatic row from its news reports in order to minimise damage to the Labour party. But circumstantial evidence of some kind of agenda at play would increase as the election campaign progressed.

## **Council Tax Freeze**

The Scottish election campaign of 2011 was to be dominated by one issue - the council tax ... or rather the *freeze* on the council tax. It had been introduced by the SNP in 2007. The Nationalists had pledged to introduce a local income tax as a replacement for the council tax. However threats from the then UK Labour government to withhold £400m of council tax benefit from the Scottish block grant, coupled with insufficient support in the Scottish parliament, meant the policy was shelved.

The council tax had been a thorn in the side of Scottish Labour since 2007 when Jack McConnell found himself outmanoeuvred by the SNP. Labour was opposed to the freeze, but the party was hamstrung by a failure to propose a replacement. In October 2010 Scottish Labour again confirmed its opposition to the policy when Iain Gray pledged to end the freeze if he became First Minister.



## Labour signals end to council tax freeze

Four weeks later Gray underlined the stance in a BBC interview, explaining his party would allow councils to increase the tax, but that the increase would be capped.



## Scottish Labour's Iain Gray would cap council tax rise

Scottish Labour's stance was clear cut, the party was opposed to a continuation of the council tax freeze. As the 2011 election campaign entered March, polls began to detect a shift in momentum towards the SNP. Labour's lead over the party's main rival was reducing - the SNP was making inroads.

On March 12<sup>th</sup> 2011, with polls moving against his party, Iain Gray suddenly ditched his opposition to the council tax freeze. It was a major policy U-turn in the middle of a crucial election campaign. However instead of headlining the announcement as a U-turn, which it very clearly was, and a huge one at that, the BBC bizarrely headlined the announcement as a 'promise'.



## Scots Labour leader Gray promises council tax freeze

The BBC also described the policy announcement merely as an “apparent change”. This was despite Gray, and other senior Labour MSPs, having already pledged to *end* the freeze. Those pledges had been reported by BBC Scotland itself.

Having the U-turn described by the BBC as a ‘promise’ minimised the damage to Labour’s election campaign. Whether that was BBC Scotland’s intention isn’t known. What is known though is that Labour was very clearly in trouble with the council tax freeze, so much so that Iain Gray had ditched his party’s long held opposition to it.

Things were moving in the right direction for the SNP. The freeze, identified by the public as an SNP flagship policy, was emerging as a key issue. It was solid ground for Alex Salmond’s party. Scottish Labour, so long regarded as a shoe-in for the 2011 Scottish election, was now looking very vulnerable.

As this book has demonstrated already, BBC Scotland was no slouch when it came to picking up anti-SNP stories generated by newspapers. And in March, with Scottish Labour needing something to puncture the SNP’s momentum, a story duly materialised. On March 31<sup>st</sup> a story appeared on BBC Scotland online news.



The BBC Scotland story centred on a two year old Freedom of Information [FoI] request that had been submitted to the Scottish government by the Telegraph newspaper. The newspaper wanted the Scottish government to release a confidential memo on the apparent cost implications of Local Income Tax that had been written by an academic in 2009. The policy, as I have already explained, had been shelved by the SNP amid funding threats from the UK Labour government and a lack of parliamentary support.

In February 2011, the Scottish Information Commissioner had ruled the memo should be released. However the Scottish government appealed, claiming that information that helped formulate government policy was exempt from FoI requests.

A week after the first headline, the BBC ran another online article headlined: ***SNP's local tax 'would cost more'***. The headline was subsequently altered to: ***Scottish election: Leaked paper reveals tax plan cost***.



## Scottish election: Leaked paper reveals tax plan cost

Someone had leaked the memo to the Telegraph newspaper right in the middle of the election campaign. The newspaper published the advice contained in the memo, applying its own spin - as it was entitled to do. The newspaper article did not centre on the merits, or otherwise, of a local income tax but was more an attempt at undermining the SNP in the middle of an election campaign. There was nothing wrong or unusual in that, given that the editor of the Telegraph in Scotland - Alan Cochrane - was vehemently opposed to the SNP and independence.

But the BBC's decision to headline the Telegraph's piece of political mischief was peculiar. The BBC Scotland reporter who drafted the story was Douglas Fraser. Fraser was BBC Scotland's Business and Economy editor. But the Telegraph story wasn't an economic story, it was a political story. Indeed the whole thrust of the story was an attempt to suggest the SNP had tried to block a genuine request for information in order to prevent the public from learning the cost of local income tax. The story was the kind of article that you would expect to be published by a politically partisan newspaper. Why was BBC Scotland headlining it?

Fraser had been the political editor of the Herald newspaper before being recruited by BBC Scotland in 2008. When writing for the Herald the journalist had acquired a reputation amongst Nationalists for drafting pieces that were less than sympathetic to the SNP. Whether this was the case or not, Fraser blotted his copybook when publicly denouncing his detractors as "vermin".

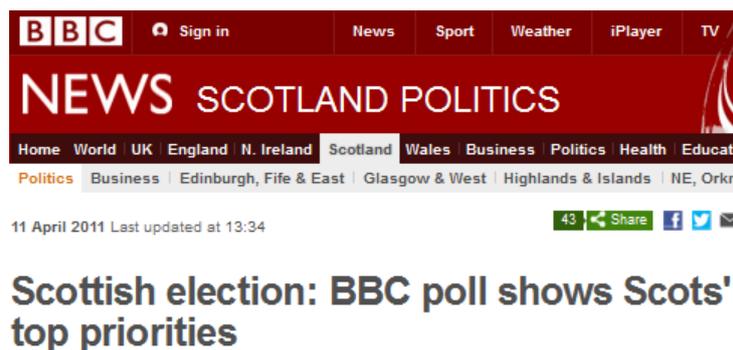
In his BBC article, Fraser referred to Local Income Tax as "already established as a major campaign issue". But it wasn't a major campaign issue. What it *was* was an attempt by opponents of the SNP to try to *introduce* it as an issue in order to deflect from Scottish Labour's difficulties over the council tax freeze. And with the BBC running articles based on the Telegraph's Freedom of Information request, it stood a decent chance of *becoming* a major campaign issue.

Within days of the BBC Scotland report, the Scottish Labour party announced its intention to print off and deliver a quarter of a million leaflets to homes around Scotland. The leaflet stated the following:

*“[The SNP] wants to charge every family in Scotland a local income tax. But they've gone to court to stop you knowing how much.”*

Had the BBC indirectly influenced the Scottish election campaign? The corporation would probably have argued no. The story, after all, had initiated in the Telegraph newspaper and the BBC was merely reporting it. But it wouldn't be long before BBC Scotland *would* influence the 2011 Scottish election campaign.

On Monday April 11<sup>th</sup>, less than four weeks before the Scottish election, a rather surprising news story emerged on the BBC. The story centred on the results of an opinion poll that had taken place the previous week. According to BBC Scotland the poll revealed the election priorities for Scots. The surprise lay in the fact that the poll had been commissioned by the broadcaster itself, and guess which party benefited from the results?



According to the poll, a Scottish Labour election pledge was the top priority for Scots.

BBC Scotland reported:

*In terms of parties, the top-ranked policy was in the Labour manifesto; to cut the waiting time for suspected cancer cases to see a specialist from four weeks to two.*

The poll result was picked up by every news outlet in Scotland. STV carried the news in its bulletins. It was headlined by newspapers. BBC Scotland saturated its news coverage with the results of its own poll. It had a significant impact on the election campaign. The Scottish Labour party immediately altered its campaign strategy. Within 24 hours of the BBC naming its policy as number one, Scottish Labour had launched a *Cancer Waiting Time Guarantee* campaign and announced the creation of a website urging voters to back its policy of seeing a cancer specialist within two weeks.



But had the poll been fairly conducted? Was it fair to each of the five main parties?

The BBC had initially claimed that it would survey the public on the manifesto commitments from each party. However it soon emerged that the survey had been carried out *after* the Labour party manifesto launch but *before* the SNP manifesto launch.

Challenged on this, BBC Scotland acknowledged the SNP had indeed not yet launched its own manifesto, but defended the timing of the survey:

*“However, all the main parties, plus the Scottish Greens, have made their general pledges known in BBC Scotland’s issues grid guide.*

*In terms of parties, the top-ranked policy was in the Labour manifesto; to cut the waiting time for suspected cancer cases to see a specialist from four weeks to two.”*

The poll result was not surprising given that Labour had just launched its manifesto. The manifesto launch had enjoyed widespread media coverage - not least on the BBC. Labour’s policy pledge was therefore fresh in the minds of the electorate as were the arguments put forward by senior Labour politicians. Neither the SNP nor the Scottish Greens had enjoyed similar high profile coverage. They may have provided the BBC with their respective policies, but they had not yet had the chance of pitching them to the public. There was no doubt the SNP and the Scottish Greens had been placed at a major disadvantage.

But why had BBC Scotland commissioned the poll? During an election period the BBC is not allowed to commission voting intention polls. The timing of its survey coincided with results from other pollsters that suggested Scottish Labour’s huge pre-campaign lead had been eroded and the SNP was beginning to inch ahead.

The BBC poll was commissioned from pollsters ICM and included 25 questions the broadcaster had compiled for the 1004 respondents. However there was concern that some of the questions appeared heavily qualified and may in fact have influenced the responses.

Respondents were telephoned and asked:

*“As I read out each policy, please give it a score out of 10, where 1 means that you think it should never be done and 10 means that it is very important and it should be done quickly. Please remember that the Parliament cannot do everything at once and your scores should show which are a priority and which are not.”*

This didn't ask people to list their most important policies, this asked them to decide which should be done quickly. If you ask anyone about cancer and whether treatment should be “done quickly” then they will give it a very high score.

A question on nuclear power listed only wind and wave as a possible alternative instead of the more inclusive term ‘renewable energy’. The BBC poll came close to breaking the corporation's own guidelines on conducting surveys in the midst of election campaigns.

The BBC's own guidelines say:

*We do not use language which gives greater credibility to the polls than they deserve. We should say polls "suggest" but never "prove" or even "show".*

But BBC Scotland's own headline clearly broke this guideline by claiming the poll showed Scots' top priorities. It read ‘**BBC poll shows Scots' top priorities**’.

The corporation had influenced the Scottish election campaign. But would it have any effect? The answer was no. Polls continued to show support for the SNP increasing. The public were not being swayed. In the final weeks of the campaign the Nationalists began to draw clear of Labour. A landslide victory was looking possible.

On May 5<sup>th</sup> 2011, the SNP created history by winning a majority of the seats in the Scottish Parliament. In a system specifically designed to keep the Nationalists in check, Alex Salmond's team had wriggled free. The Scots had loosened their bonds. There would be a referendum.