

AN ENGLISH PRAT

‘ONE OF THE AUDIENCE ACCUSED HIM OF BEING AN “ENGLISH PRAT”. THIS IS WHERE I COME INTO THE STORY. THE PERSON WHO INSULTED THE BUSINESS LEADER WAS MY COUSIN, ANGUS’

In the autumn of 2002, an English business leader delivered a speech to a dinner of Scottish businessmen in Glasgow, warning that anti-English sentiment might damage the Scottish economy. A reasonable warning, I would say. As a Scot, I have always disliked the English. As a schoolboy, I can remember queuing up to add my signature to the Scottish Covenant, a copy of which had been laid out in the Auchenbothie Temperance Institute. I am unsure what the covenant pledged. But it was sure to be pro-Scots and anti-English, and I happily added my name to the list of Charlie Chaplins and Betty Grables signed above me. And I have always resented the English for beating us so often at football and rugby, and for pretending that we do not even play cricket. The warning of the business leader was apt.

After the dinner, one of the audience – in the business leader’s hearing, but not to his face – accused him of being an “English prat”. This is where I come into the story. The person who insulted the business leader was my cousin, Angus. Angus is bald, and has a very loud voice (by comparison, I have a full head of hair, but a very soft voice). Perhaps Angus was just whispering the phrase at the other end of the banquetting suite, but such is the strength of his boom that his insult leaped over rows of tables and chairs and hit the ears of the business leader.

Anyway, to use the phrase “English prat” is not like swearing. It is rude, a shade offensive, but not to such a degree that it would make my grandmother say: “See yon wee Angus. He needs his mooth washing oot wi’ soap and water.” It is definitely not like swearing. What made this incident newsworthy was that Angus is a member of the Scottish Parliament. What made it even more newsworthy is that Angus is a member of the Scottish Executive, no less. Angus is about five years younger than me, and we never had been *that* close. We both used to dress up in kilts to visit our granny on a Sunday afternoon but after I left Auchenbothie we lost contact to the extent that nowadays we do not even exchange Christmas cards.

He had followed the same career path as me, and word came back he had joined a small Scottish merchant bank. “Working for a merchant bank. Mmm. Isn’t Angus doing well,” we thought. Then word came back that he had left the merchant bank, since being a

merchant banker interfered with his political work. (Maybe, the true reason is the other way round.)

No word for years. Then, the Treasurer of Widgets came back from a visit to his elderly mother in rural Scotland and reported that every telephone pole he passed on the country roads had a poster showing a bald head and the message “Vote for Angus F”. I had to admit I was related to the face on the telephone poles and guessed that Angus had begun to take politics very, very seriously. After that, we scanned the constituency results for Westminster Elections, looking for a mention of Angus in every remote Scottish seat. Angus never won any election, since he was running for a minority party. We breathed a sigh of relief.

Silence for years. Not a word, not a rumour. Then came the first elections for the new Scottish Parliament. Voters had been bundled into super-constituencies and we gathered that Angus would be running in the super-constituency that included Auchenbothie. We looked up the results for Great Mucky Region on Teletext.

Again, Angus came well down the list and we gave another sigh of relief. We had forgotten that the new Scottish Parliament was chosen under a system of Proportional Representation, with each party allowed to fill seats from its own list to match its share of the total vote. (I am probably simplifying things, since this system of Proportional Representation makes a typical derivatives product look like a kindergarten colouring book.) Well, we thought, Angus has worked hard for his party all his adult life and probably deserves a seat, and, as a backbench member of a minority party, he cannot do any harm.

We had forgotten about another effect of Proportional Representation. The party with the biggest number of seats needs to form an alliance with a minority party to form a government. The horse-trading dragged on.

One minority party finally agreed to link up with the biggest party in return for places on the Scottish Executive. (I guess that the closest Westminster equivalent to the Executive would be the Cabinet.) The deal was done and places on the Executive were given to the stars of the minority party. One of those stars was my cousin, Angus.

After his voice had boomed across that banquetting room in Glasgow, I began to wish that I still took a Scottish newspaper or could tune into a Scottish TV channel. The coverage in the English media was slight. A few mentions on BBC radio. The odd paragraph on the inside pages of the broadsheets.

The occasional editorial, not altogether serious, suggesting that Angus could not object to being called a Scottish git. The news filtering across the border was that there had been calls for Angus’s resignation, that Angus had made a formal apology. Angus did not resign and the story died.

Pity that, for I could have sold to the tabloids the photograph of Angus and me in our juvenile kilts visiting our granny. **JF**