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# (SUB)NATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE EUROPEAN UNION – THE CASE OF ALEX SALMOND

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to describe the phenomena of regional leadership basing on the case of Alex Salmond. Many states of the modern European Union may be described as a federalized or at decentralized – after the Scottish and Welsh devolution in 1997–1999 United Kingdom should be included into this list. Decentralization creates political opportunities for regional leaders, especially where separatists movements are strong, as in the case of Scotland. It may result in additional pressure to the political system and in the further deconstruction of the state.

Alex Salmond is currently the First Minister of Scotland and has successfully fought for the independence referendum which is going to take place in 2014. Such kind of political biography through the ranks of the most acclaimed political democracy of the world deserves a detailed explanation. It cannot be explained only by mentioning his public relations skills (often negatively called by his opponents of “spinning”). Salmond has also created the specific vision of Scottish National Party and independent Scotland, that can’t be left when describing his leadership.

## II. BRITON OF THE YEAR

He can be easily named the most important politician in Scotland after the devolution. His series of political successes led to some astonishing comparisons, as the one of David Torrance, who said that “it is tempting to liken him to Robert the Bruce”<sup>1</sup>. BBC political editor Nick Robinson appraised Salmond as “the canniest political operator in these isles”<sup>2</sup> and BBC is not reckoned as SNP-friendly media. Other label him “a genuine big political beast”<sup>3</sup>. The most famous Scot in the world – actor Sean Connery thinks Salmond “is head and shoulders above every other politician, not just in Scotland but the UK”<sup>4</sup>.

After bewildering victories in two consecutive elections to the Scottish Parliament he became approved by media throughout United Kingdom – he became Politician of the year by the Spectator and the Herald in Glasgow and, what is the most startling, Briton of the year by the Times.

Alex Salmond was born on 31st of December 1954 in Linlithgow – West Lothian. He received his education at Linlithgow Academy and St Andrews University earning MA in economics and history. His professional career started in the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland and Royal Bank of Scotland, where he served as an assistant economist, and later economist<sup>5</sup>.

Salmon was engaged in political activities in the late 70s, but his path to glory started in 1987 when he became Member of Parliament (MP) for Banff and Buchan. He based his campaigning on scorching attack at Labour

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<sup>1</sup> D. Torrance, *Salmond: Against the Odds*, Edinburgh 2010, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> P. Carrell, *Alex Salmond: a canny political operator, but not infallible*, “The Guardian” 11.01.2012.

<sup>3</sup> G. Hassan, *Alex Salmond, Rupert Murdoch and the Pitfalls of Crony Capitalism*, “The Guardian” 26.04.2012.

<sup>4</sup> J. McAlpine, *Alex Salmond is head & shoulders above every politician... not just in Scotland but the whole of the UK*, “The Sun” 12.04.2011. <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/scottishnews/3521977/Sir-Sean-Connery-and-Alex-Salmond-share-a-dream-independence-for-Scotland.html> (updated: 30.08.2012).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1034091/Alex-Salmond> (updated: 30.08.2012).

Party MP's calling them "feeble fifty"<sup>6</sup>. Three years later he became national convener for the Scottish National Party – spending ten years at this post till 2000. After four years of John Swinney's leadership, Salmond became again national convener in 2004. He was Member of Scottish Parliament (MSP) in years 1999–2001 and from 2007 till now<sup>7</sup>. In the year 2007 he became First Minister of Scotland. Scottish election in 2011, which SNP won by a landslide, was cataclysmic for the political system of Scotland. As Katie Grant stated "the collapse of the Tories is an old story. The collapse of Labour is what's new"<sup>8</sup>.

Salmond is viewed by his supporters and colleagues as a charismatic and magnetic person. As Gerry Hassan put it: „In company, Salmond can be charming, intelligent, diverting and intriguing. He is without doubt one of the closest and most thoughtful observers of the political scene"<sup>9</sup>.

Before 2007 there were question marks over the Salmonds political competence and a suspicion that high spending policies will be frequent<sup>10</sup>. As James Mitchell expressed it: „Salmond was a man who was supposed to be going to bring the sky down if he came into power. In fact, he proved competent". We have to take into account that through years 2007–2011 Salmond was leading a minority government with three rather hostile opposition parties. Still, SNP very rarely lost voting in the Parliament and was able to pass a budget every time.

The SNP leader has offered a vision of a more confident Scotland and has brought self-belief and dynamism into the government of Scotland. Salmond likes to remind that Scotland had the highest GDP per head in the world in 1900 and that this should be Scotland's modern aspiration. One of the advantages of Salmond's SNP over their political opponents is clear and radical agenda – whatever you think about them, you know what

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<sup>6</sup> M. Pitcock, *The Road to Independence? Scotland Since the Sixties*, London 2008, p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.snp.org/people/alex-salmond> (updated:30.08.2012).

<sup>8</sup> G. Hassan, *The Battle for Britain has begun*, "New Statesman" 16.01.2012, <http://www.newstatesman.com/uk-politics/2012/01/scottish-scotland-british> (updated: 30.08.2012).

<sup>9</sup> G. Hassan, *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*, Edinburgh 2010, p. 167.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 84.

they want to do with the country. Scottish press before 2007 often complained that Scottish government lacked a charismatic leader with a compelling agenda – it is no longer the case.

To fully understand the importance of Salmond for Scottish politics and Scotland as a whole, we must remind how SNP plummeted in elections when Salmond took four years off and the fortunes of SNP changed once again (this time in another direction) when his charismatic aura came back to the leadership<sup>11</sup>.

The vision of Scottishness, which is the staple of Salmond's SNP, may be also regarded as his merit. This vision is far away from the blood and soil vision of nationality, and is characterized rather by inclusiveness and openness. The first Member of Scottish Parliament of Asian descent – Bashir Ahmad was chosen from the lists of SNP, not Liberal Democrats nor Labour Party. Salmond's SNP was the first party in Scotland that translated its manifesto into the Polish language. Salmond often even verbally supported the increase of immigration in order to bring more talent into Scottish society. Some accused Salmond of hostility towards England, what resulted in emblematic Salmond's response – "There is not an anti-English bone in my body. I have forgotten more about English history than most Tory MPs ever learned"<sup>12</sup>. Gerry Hassan described that Salmond is implicitly post-nationalist rather than conventionally nationalist. A survey last year of the SNP's membership by Professor James Mitchell of Strathclyde University showed a more pragmatic view of what independence is, at ease with sharing powers and sovereignties in the European Union and the UK. Salmond has been consistently creating the image of business-friendly politics. It has served few purposes. At first it provided funding for SNP that had to compete with well established UK parties. The money invested by businessmen such as Brian Souter and Sir Tom Farmer deserve some credit for the success in 2007 elections. Moreover, as Salmond was sending coher-

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<sup>11</sup> T. Happold, Who will be the next SNP leader?, "The Guardian" 22.06.2004.

<sup>12</sup> T. McVeigh, Alex Salmond: Scotland's new superhero, "The Guardian" 08.05.2011.

ent, business-friendly message to the voters it helped to transform image of SNP as party capable of responsible governing of Scottish economy. He has been keen on showing his close connections to greatest world tycoons like Rupert Murdoch and Donald Trumps.<sup>13</sup> All of that was aimed to bring jobs to Scotland. It may seem surprising, as Salmond was beforehand part of radical left-wing faction in SNP. In his first term as the SNP leader he gave the party an unequivocal social democratic identity. Then, after unsuccessful Penny for Scotland campaign in 1999 and losing in the first Scottish Parliament election to Scottish Labour Party his move to the centre started.

Still, both mentioned relationships with tycoons have appeared to be awkward lately. During Leveson Inquiry it was testified that Murdoch appeared to think that SNP leader would intervene on behalf of his company News International. Consequently, Labour leader Ed Miliband has described Mr Salmond as an “undercover lobbyist” for Murdoch<sup>14</sup>.

Summing up, Salmond has managed to position his party very efficiently in the Scottish party system. As Gerry Hassan formulated that “The SNP’s “big-tent” politics, social democratic yet pro-business, leaves the opposition with little terrain to mark out”<sup>15</sup>.

### III. SPINNING IN A POLITICAL VACUUM

Alex Salmond, as most political leaders, is often criticized from different points of view. Some point at him lacking skills other than those in Public Relations. His former mentor – Jim Sillars accused him of being only a spin machine, spinning in a policy vacuum. Critics assess him as lacking “intellectual curiosity”. Salmond is not in fact

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<sup>13</sup> P. Carrell, Alex Salmond: a canny political operator...

<sup>14</sup> T. Peterkin, S. MacNab, Alex Salmond is an ‘undercover lobbyist’ for Murdoch, says Ed Miliband, “The Scotsman” 28.04.2012.

<sup>15</sup> J. Cowley, Mr Scotland, chauvinism and the SNP’s big-tent nationalism, “New Statesman” 26.01.2012, <http://www.newstatesman.com/uk-politics/2012/01/salmond-scotland-snp-scottish> (updated: 30.08.2012).

strongly committed to his political positions, he may be viewed as very pragmatic.

All these – social democratic and pro-business at one time, political spinning and pragmatism – may and is viewed by many as a modern populism. Allistair Campbell, politically opposite to Salmond, admitted with some jealousy, that SNP leader is slick communicator, always on message, always positioning himself on the populist side of as many causes as he could back. Salmond's opinion that he "didn't mind the economic side to Margaret Thatcher, but disapproved of the social implications of her policies"<sup>16</sup> may be regarded as essential example. Most would not mind economics side to Thatcher without social implications, but to this day no one could achieve that.

Similarly he abstains from taking clear stance about controversial issues like i. e. gay marriage. Asked about Scottish Government policy about this issue he stated that he was "supportive of gay marriage", but at the same time that this is "issue that excites substantial interest" and "whatever side of the debate we are on, we must treat the matter sensitively and properly" refraining from any further actions.

This may be reasonable as Torrance notes that "the trouble is that different sections of society project on to independence what they want it to mean, be they left, right and everything in between". This, he argues, is "fine in uniting people towards a common goal, but the outcome inevitably can't please everyone"<sup>17</sup>.

Salmond has celebrity touch and even likes to mingle with celebrities, which seems to be part of the modern campaign politics<sup>18</sup>. He frequently appears in the public of sporting events and even made cameo appearance in one of the movies. However, after spending three decades as a public figure there is little know about his private life. His wife Moira very rarely takes part in public events.

Some point at Salmond's egotism and arrogance<sup>19</sup>. A few months ago politician flabbergasted observers by trying to gain praise for Margaret

<sup>16</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/scotland/7576801.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/scotland/7576801.stm) (updated: 30.08.2012).

<sup>17</sup> G. Hassan, *The Battle for Britain has begun...*

<sup>18</sup> B. Taylor, *Scotland's Parliament: Triumph and Disaster*, Edinburgh 2001, p. 168.

<sup>19</sup> P. Carrell, *Alex Salmond: a canny political operator...*

Thatcher's dismissal 20 years ago, which was in Salmond's opinion initiated by him – at that time the young backbencher in the Westminster, who criticized poll tax vehemently. Salmond's budget speech helped to promote the idea that the Thatcher government was not impregnable. This self-importance earned him nickname "El Presidente Salmondo"<sup>20</sup>. Other points that "Jim Sillars apart (...) he has not looked upon anyone as a genuine equal for some time"<sup>21</sup>.

Biography by David Torrance, mostly very sympathetic to Salmond, it was pointed at the other trait of Salmond – strong, demanding leadership bordering on the instrumental treatment of colleagues. One of his former colleagues recalled working for Salmond as a "crushing, a soul-destroying, emotional train wreck for an individual". It is probably rather one-sided analysis of Salmond, as we must keep in mind that he is part of a team – an experienced group of people including Nicola Sturgeon and John Swinney sharing same objectives and cooperating efficiently for a long time. Sturgeon and Swinney started as Salmond's governmental tenure five years ago as his closest coworkers and it has not changed a little bit till now.

Salmond was criticized for treating politics like a game of chess. It would be wrong to say he's not genuinely committed, but he's "got no fire within him". However, other noticed that Salmond had changed much in this department. M. Russell thinks that Alex Salmond today is quite different from the Alex Salmond of before. 21st-century Salmond is a much mellower, subtler and charismatic character"<sup>22</sup>.

Salmond's political career is not of course one straight road to glory consisting of only successes. There were many failures, which probably were instrumental in shaping Salmond's personality and talents. In the beginning of his political career future leader was even expelled out of SNP. This happened in 1982 after period of strong factionalism in the party – Salmond was member of the radical left-wing faction. Some point at the fact that 79 Group (as this faction was called) was in fact reaction to previously rather muddy ideology, and Salmond was joined there by

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<sup>20</sup> I. Jack, The north of England lacks a political champion. Step up El Presidente Pickles, "The Guardian" 24.06.2011.

<sup>21</sup> D. Torrance, Salmond..., p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> P. Carrell, Alex Salmond: a canny political operator...

other able leaders like Roseanna Cunningham, Stephen Maxwell and later Jim Sillars<sup>23</sup>.

Other would keep in mind his notorious critic of Kosovo campaign. Salmond aggressively opposed to any kind of engagement in the former Yugoslavia, what was based mostly on his contest of war of any kind. Still, as NATO campaign in Kosovo was perceived mostly as motivated by humanitarian aims, his opposition wasn't even supported by many SNP members<sup>24</sup>.

Probably even Salmond would name the elections to Scottish Parliament in 1999 as his biggest letdown, especially as it led to his resignation from being the leader of SNP. His party lost elections clearly with hated Scottish Labour Party as a winner. Salmond's concept of getting votes by campaign „Penny for Scotland” was in fact blunder<sup>25</sup>. The basis of the campaign was the proposal of raising taxes by Scottish Parliament in order to help Scotland's development, which not surprisingly did not garner much public support. The proposal was strongly influenced by Salmond's socialist background and might be the main cause of poor electoral result. This kind of error was never repeated.

Popularizing the vision of the independent Scotland, Salmond was often referring to creative image of the arc of prosperity. This arch would be created by countries in the north-western Europe such as Ireland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and eventually Scotland – small, but wealthy with great living conditions. Ireland after economic boom was even called Celtic Tiger, so Salmond like to envision independent Scotland as Celtic Lion – strong economy, low unemployment and success in the international markets. Last years of credit crunch, which started by total collapse of economies in Ireland and Iceland, resulted in concept of arch prosperity being frequently mocked by opposition. Labour politician called it even arc of insolvency<sup>26</sup>. Other main controversies about Salmond stemmed

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<sup>23</sup> There was also faction on ther right side of SNP – Siol nan Gaidheal – but much weaker than Group 79, M. Pitcock, *The Road to...*, p. 70–71.

<sup>24</sup> L. Paterson, *New Scotland. New Politics?*, Edinburgh 2001, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> P. Carrell, *Alex Salmond: a canny political operator...*

<sup>26</sup> D. Chartier, *The End of Iceland's Innocence: The Image of Iceland in the Foreign Media*, Ottawa 2011, p. 175.



from his involvement in the release of Lockerbie prisoners<sup>27</sup> and lately form his scorching attack on Scottish judges

Economic crisis in Ireland and Iceland was really painful for Salmond as in some way the case for independence was before crisis switched by him to economic and business grounds and tax competition. Joining Nordic social democracy with the Irish-style low business taxes seemed to be good way to attract voters to SNP and independence postulate. After credit crunch Salmond presents independence as more continuity than change involving maintaining monetary union with the rest of the UK and retaining the Bank of England as Scotland's lender of last resort.

#### **IV. FROM FIRST MINISTER TO PRIME MINISTER?**

Salmond seems to possess strong motivation about bringing independence to Scotland. As his friend Mike Russell says, he has the need of leaving something useful behind, partly because he is childless. Russell recalls walking down a street with Salmond was like watching a crusade to personally convert every Scottish voter<sup>28</sup>.

One of his most visible traits and at the same his political ambition is to deal with British Prime Minister as his peers. Salmond – positioning himself rather as a leader of a nation than leader of a region intends to establish more importance to Scottish Government. It was also the reason for changing the terminology of Scottish institutions. After winning his first Scottish elections he started to use term Scottish Government instead of previous Scottish Executive. It took some time for his British counterparts to recognize this change and in fact this change has no legal grounds – devolution's institutions have been formally shaped by United Kingdom's "Scotland Act" and to this day this Act uses the term Executive. But as Salmond summed up elections of 2007 he used famous reference to Mac-

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<sup>27</sup> G. Hassan, *The Modern SNP...*, p. 181.

<sup>28</sup> D. Torrance, *Salmond...*, p. 54.

millan's decolonization speech, in which he claimed that a wind of change is blowing<sup>29</sup>.

These ambitions of course leads to clashes with Prime Ministers of United Kingdom (Salmond would rather prefer to use term English Prime Ministers in this case). Tony Blair was said to vehemently loathe Salmond and tried not to engage in any kind of personal relationship. Blair even refused to call Mr Salmond to congratulate him on his victory in 2007. Similarly, Gordon Brown instead of acting personally preferred to use his Scottish Secretary to deal with Salmond, which was treated by him as offensive. Salmond did not treat any Secretary in Cabinet as equal and vociferously demanded direct meetings with Prime Minister<sup>30</sup>. In both cases, we have to take into account that Labour Prime Ministers had special connections with Scotland. Tony Blair was born in Scotland and even went to school in Edinburgh, although he has never perceived himself as Scottish. Gordon Brown is true Scotsman, born and raised there and always representing Scottish constituencies in Westminster. Brown preferred vision of Scotland much different of Salmond's– ties with England should never be broken and viewed Scotland as beneficiary as a member of United Kingdom at least at the same rate as England is<sup>31</sup>.

Ironically, some journalist notice great deal of similarity between Salmond and Blair. Tony Blair was viewed for long time as proud, passionate, patriotic and positive. This characteristic is shared by Alex Salmond. Modernization has been the key word for both. Both created the attractive political image mixing solutions from left – and right-wing agenda.

There was some hope that after governmental change a different type of relations would be established between Salmond and the new prime minister – David Cameron from Conservative Party. Cameron called Salmond in 2007 after he won elections to offer his congratulations. They spoke again by phone after Cameron electoral success, with the First Minister returning the compliment. It was also said that Salmond and

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<sup>29</sup> M. Pitcock, *The Road to...*, p. 173.

<sup>30</sup> G. Hassan, *The Modern SNP...*, p. 182.

<sup>31</sup> C. Higgins, S. Carrell, Gordon Brown cites Olympic success as reason to oppose Scottish independence, "The Guardian" 13.08.2012.

Chancellor in Cameron's cabinet – George Osborne were on good speaking terms<sup>32</sup>.

Predictably, it was not going to last for long. Crucial differences about Scotland's place in United Kingdom and heated debates about procedural matters resulted in more adversary relations. Although Cameron stated his approval of the idea of referendum about Scottish independence, both sides are far from finding the middle ground concerning important details of referendum. Cameron prefers to have referendum as quickly as it is realistically possible – probably in 2013, which is opposed by Salmond. British Prime Minister ironically remarked that he “thought we were watching the movie *Braveheart*, but it turns out it is the *Chicken Run*”<sup>33</sup>. Salmond wanted it to be held in autumn 2014 without really trying to be persuasive and not giving any kind of argumentation. The key principle of Salmond is that the timing of the referendum has to be decided by the Scottish Parliament<sup>34</sup>.

Independence referendum probably would be the most important moment of Salmond's political career. Fundamental and tactical doubts arise about problems other than the timing of the referendum. The wording of the referendum question seems to be most contentious Salmond would prefer option “Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?” which on the other hand is viewed by his opponents as the one provoking psychological and emotional response.

There are also many doubts whether there should be only one question in the referendum. Second question would refer to the alternative of further devolution (so called devolution max or “devo-max”)<sup>35</sup> instead of independence. There is no agreement inside SNP whether referendum

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<sup>32</sup> Alex Salmond and David Cameron: New relationships begins on friendlier terms, “The Fife Today” 13.05.2010, <http://www.fifetoday.co.uk/news/local-headlines/alex-salmond-and-david-cameron-new-relationship-begins-on-friendlier-terms-1-804118> (updated: 1.09.2012)

<sup>33</sup> K. Bussey, David Cameron tells Alex Salmond to stop dithering, “The Independent”, 23.03.2012.

<sup>34</sup> J. Friend, *Stateless Nations: Western European Regional Nationalism and the Old Nations*, Basingstoke 2012, p. 41.

<sup>35</sup> P. Jenkins, Devo max would make Scotland fiscally responsible – why does Cameron oppose it?, “The Guardian” 12.01.2012.

should include two questions. Sillars warned of the extreme danger of the move, which he claimed would bolster support for the alternative at the expense of outright independence.

Some accused Salmond that as a tactician he considers a third option: no referendum at all. In this case he would blame Westminster for lack of referendum and use it as a leverage during elections. It would be his victory if he convinced voters that Westminster is denying the Scottish people the chance to decide on their own future.

Labour Party politicians see decision not to call a referendum immediately after the 2011 election as a Salmond's failure and compare it even to Gordon Brown's disastrous decision not to call an election shortly after he succeeded Tony Blair as prime minister.

It must be added that though SNP's existence is based on the postulate of the independence, the popularity of both differ much. Opinion polls have never showed the level of support for independence to be as large as support for SNP in last elections. It proves, that many perceive SNP as a competent party taking care of Scottish people. Still, SNP cannot allow itself to abandon visibly pursuing the goal of independence. It would lose a lot of credibility and coherence of the party. On the other side, losing the referendum would be probably disastrous not only independence postulate for decades, but also for its main proponent – SNP.

## V. CONCLUSION

The importance of Alex Salmond is seen clearly from a proper perspective. Journalists observing politics in Wales comment that “Welsh Labour did have one major advantage over their Scottish counterparts – namely no nationalist opponent with even half the clout of Alex Salmond. The previous Plaid leader, Ieuan Wyn Jones, hardly inspired voters, and his replacement Leanne Wood, a Castro Cuba-loving old-fashioned lefty, is struggling to prove that her strategy of being more socialist than Labour can work”<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> David Maddox, Peter Hain's Welsh legacy may cause ripples further afield, “The Scotsman” 15.05.2012.

Alex Salmond is closer than ever to his ultimate aim of the independence for Scotland. His political leadership may result in breaking up the United Kingdom and as far-fetched it may sound – Salmond is close to irreversibly changing the history of Europe. The decision about independence referendum has already been made. The result of it is difficult is very difficult to predict. Still, the fact it will happen may be added to a long list of his successes. Salmond may serve as a clear example that political leadership matters. His charisma, public relations talents and organizational skills have allowed him to dominate Scottish Politics for at least last ten years. Without him the fate of SNP would be doubtful and in consequence possibilities of Scottish independence would be scarce. He did the best from opportunities presented to him – devolution reform created the political venue where could act as a primary actor. If the independence referendum ended with positive result, it would be a precedence – the democratic leader of region would transform himself into the state leader. This can cause the precedence that can change not only the future of United Kingdom, but also the future of Europe. There are many regions looking closely at what is happening in Scotland. We could mention Catalonia as the one of many.

### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to describe one exemplification of the phenomena of subnational leadership in the conditions of widely developed European integration, that created multi level political stratus. Alex Salmond for many years stands as charismatic leader of regional political party and succeeded in electoral competition. His method of political activities are stemming controversies, though, the summary of his overall political activities must point out his influence on the structure of modern United Kingdom – there is great possibility that we are 1–2 years ago from independence referendum.