

# The SNP's exponential rise is throwing the British system of government into turmoil

By Democratic Audit UK

*The General Election of 2015 looks set to be an exceptionally good one for the SNP, who look set to not only supplant Labour as the largest party north of the border, but to rout it. **Sean Swan** argues that this could see considerable change in the way British politics is conducted in future, particularly given their possible involvement in any minority or coalition government emerging from the election.*



Credit: [First Minister of Scotland](#), CC BY NC SA 2.0

In 2005 Labour won a General Election on 35.2% of the vote; in 2014 *Yes Scotland* lost the independence referendum on 44.7%. Arendt Lijphart, states that a key feature of the Westminster system of government is a “[disproportional system of elections](#)”. This disproportional electoral system – First Past the Post – could potentially transform the 44.7% referendum Yes vote into 80%+ of Scottish seats in a general election.

The Yes side’s response to defeat was political mobilisation via the SNP, aiming to hold the balance of power following the May general election. By 22 September SNP membership had jumped 70%. Over 18,000 people had joined since the referendum, bringing membership to a record [43,644](#). By March, membership had reached [100,000](#), making the SNP the third largest UK party by membership. The SNP today is what Labour once was – a movement.

Alex Salmond resigned as SNP leader and First Minister, to be succeeded in both offices by his highly competent deputy, Nicola Sturgeon. Far from retiring, Salmond is standing in the general election. If Salmond’s resignation was ultimately a tactical repositioning in preparation for a new battle, the same could hardly be said of the dramatic resignation of Scottish Labour leader Johann Lamont in October. Lamont explained her resignation in Scottish particularist terms of the failure by the UK Labour leadership to give Scottish Labour more autonomy, adding that Labour in Westminster “[do not understand](#)” Scottish politics. Whereas SNP membership was skyrocketing, Labour were “[struggling to get beyond around 13,000](#)”.

The obvious target for a resurgent independence movement is Labour. Not only are Labour the party to beat in Scotland, but Labour had committed what Scots view as something close to an act of gross indecency – during the Referendum campaign they had stood “[shoulder to shoulder with the Tories](#)”. The potential cost of associating with

the Tories was demonstrated in the 2011 Holyrood elections, when Scots rejected the Lib Dems in [protest](#) at their coalition with the Conservatives, costing them 12 of their 17 seats. The referendum had itself been a warning to Labour. Scotland voted No, but Labour heartlands like Glasgow had voted Yes.

## The General Election

The [predicted](#) outcome of this election is a hung parliament in which the SNP are the third largest party and hold the balance of power. This rules out a single party government and three possible scenarios arise:

### 1) Honest Labour

A Labour/SNP deal is the easiest fit. Labour is already [pledging](#) more powers for the Scottish Parliament. The SNP has said it is willing to do a deal with Labour. Labour have [ruled out](#) a coalition, but not a confidence and supply deal. The [red line](#) for the SNP is scrapping Trident. This is problematic because in the event of a confidence and supply deal, a Labour government could renew Trident in the face of SNP opposition by relying on Tory support. For the SNP to truly make Trident a red line, they would have to be prepared to trigger a vote of confidence on the issue and potentially bring down a Labour government – a politically dangerous move for the SNP.

For the SNP any deal with Labour would give the lie to the “*vote SNP get Tories*” claim, and help copper-fasten their position as the dominant party in Scotland. The SNP could force Labour to the left. Policies such as unilateral nuclear disarmament were once (pre-Blair) Labour policies. The SNP would also oppose increased austerity. An SNP/Labour deal might, in short, produce an ‘old Labour’ government. An ‘old’ Labour government *sans* a majority in England and put in power by the SNP, would inflame the ‘English Question’. Gus O’Donnell, former head of the civil service, argues it “[would put the question of Scottish independence back on the agenda](#)”.

Alternatively, Scottish separatism is partially driven by opposition to variants of Thatcherite/New Labour neoliberalism. A leftwing Labour government might see the re-emergence of cross-cleavage cutting left/right politics and provide an acceptable alternative to separatism.

### 2) Devo Max meets Max EVEL?

A Conservative/SNP deal has been ruled out by the SNP and would normally be considered mutually unconscionable, but is still conceivable. Scotland has nothing to offer the Tories except Labour and SNP MPs, as Vernon Bogdanor points out, many Conservatives “[believe that Scotland is another country with which they need not concern themselves](#)”. Furthermore, the [West Lothian Question](#) and [EVEL](#) provide ammunition to Tory rivals on the right such as UKIP. What if the Tories were to view Scotland as a lost cause?

A ‘divorce settlement’ is imaginable in which full Devo Max – Scottish control over everything except defence and foreign relations – is exchanged for a radical reduction in the voting rights of Scottish MPs in Westminster and/or a reduction in the number of MPs returned from Scotland: call it ‘Max EVEL’. This requires the victory of Tory pragmatism over Unionist ideology, and for the SNP to risk a one-off supping with the Devil in exchange for Devo Max.

But the devil would be in the detail and trust in short supply. The SNP would have uppermost in their minds the fate of the Lib Dems and the (broken) promise of electoral reform following the creation of the Lib Dem-Tory coalition.

### 3) Alex Salmond, Leader of the Opposition

It is always possible for Labour and the Conservatives to lock out the SNP by doing a deal together. Germany and the Social Democrat/Christian Democrat grand coalition provides an obvious model. (A variant of this already exists in Tory/Labour general election [voting pacts](#)). But there are political difficulties here. It would cause a haemorrhaging of Conservative support to UKIP, and of Labour support to the SNP and the Greens. The SNP, as the largest non-Government party, would also become the Official Opposition. A purely Scottish Opposition would put the British Constitution to the torture. It is doubtful, for these and other reasons, whether a Labour/Conservative coalition would be countenanced.

## The Systemic crisis

The fundamental question is whether a 'British' nation still exists. 62.4% of Scots reject a British national identity, identifying as 'Scottish only'. A shared party system is central to 'British' politics, and if the SNP supplant Labour in Scotland, it will be "harder than ever to talk about 'British politics'". A "two-party system", and "one-party and bare majority cabinets" are another two of Lijphart's key features of the Westminster system. Both arise from the disproportional electoral system and strongly favour the Tories and Labour. There is little incentive for Labour and Conservatives to reform an electoral system so advantageous to them, but it is difficult to see how a 'British' party system can be maintained short of the introduction of PR that would at least see some Tories returned by Scotland.

Of course it would also mean the permanent end of single party government and a two party system (but this may be inevitable anyway, given the decline in the share of the vote won by Labour and Tories combined in recent elections). The current crisis requires something close to Scottish independence or PR or the re-emergence of traditional cross-cleavage cutting left/right politics. None of this is likely, the British crisis will rumble on.

—

*Note: this post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

—

**Sean Swan** is a Lecturer in Political Science at Gonzaga University, Washington State.