

# Indyref2: A bold but unsurprising move from Nicola Sturgeon

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*In a speech on 13 March, Nicola Sturgeon outlined her intention to call a second Scottish independence referendum. **Paul Anderson** writes that while the announcement was not surprising given recent speculation, it was nevertheless a bold move on the part of Sturgeon. Only time will tell, however, whether she will be remembered as the First Minister who presided over the independence of Scotland or the leader who got it spectacularly wrong.*



Nicola Sturgeon on 13 March 2017, Credit: Scottish Government/Flickr (CC-BY-SA-2.0)

Nicola Sturgeon's [announcement](#) that she is to seek a second independence referendum to be held between autumn 2018 and spring 2019 is a bold but unsurprising move from the Scottish First Minister. She has spelled out that first she will seek the approval of the Scottish Parliament which, with a majority of pro-independence MSPs (the SNP and Greens), should prove no obstacle.

The first hurdle, however, will come from the UK Parliament which will have to approve the Scottish Parliament's request for a Section 30 Order to transfer temporary powers to Holyrood to hold a referendum. Legally, the British Parliament could refuse to grant permission to hold a referendum. Prime Minister Theresa May, for instance, has already accused Sturgeon of '[playing politics](#)' with Scotland's future, but it seems unlikely that the PM, or indeed parliament, will attempt to frustrate the will of the Scottish Government and Parliament. The PM and her ministers have vehemently criticised the First Minister's move, but have not ruled out another referendum.

While it is unlikely, although not impossible, that the British Parliament will seek to block a Section 30 Order, what is likely is that the Prime Minister will play hard ball on the issue, particularly over timing. In the previous independence referendum, the then First Minister, Alex Salmond, was given considerable freedom to choose a referendum date, but this time around the issue of timing will not be so simple. There will be further deliberations on the question(s) put to the public, the franchise (will 16-17 year olds be allowed to vote as was the case in 2014?), and the timing, but it

may well be that on the latter issue Theresa May will agree to a referendum on the condition that it is not held until Brexit negotiations are over. The issue now is not whether there will be another referendum, but when.

Calling the referendum, [as I have argued previously](#), is potentially the most important decision of Nicola Sturgeon's leadership. Sturgeon's argument is that the refusal of the British Government to engage fully with the devolved nations and pursue a UK-wide approved Brexit approach has forced her hand into calling another referendum. She complained that Theresa May's government had hitherto 'not moved even an inch in pursuit of compromise and agreement'.

The First Minister's speech came just a day or so before the expected triggering of Article 50, but Downing Street has now confirmed that the date is likely to be towards the end of the month. This information, coming just hours after First Minister's pre-emptive strike, perhaps underlines the success of Sturgeon's intervention. Might the UK government be reassessing its approach? With the independence genie once again out of the bottle, many questions remain, with one of the most important being: is there a compromise solution that could satisfy both sides? At the moment, such a compromise seems unlikely, but as the old age cliché proclaims, 'never say never' (especially in politics).

Brexit indisputably has introduced a new and challenging dynamic to the independence debate and both sides will need to contend with this in any future referendum campaign. For the unionists, Sturgeon's move will be seen as reckless and opportunist, an attempt to further complicate the Brexit negotiations and cunningly strengthen the case for independence. Theresa May's official spokesperson has [already noted](#) that 'another referendum would be divisive and cause huge economic uncertainty at the worst possible time'. For pro-independence supporters, however, independence is painted as an alternative to the potential economic uncertainty of Brexit. Economic uncertainty in an independent Scotland, it seems, is a better alternative to the economic uncertainty of hard-Brexit Britain.

The future of Scotland appears to be outside one (if not both) of the unions of which it is currently a member. Support for independence has not dramatically risen since either the 2014 independence referendum or the 2016 Brexit vote and while it is currently around the 50% mark, it has yet to remain steadily above this threshold. There is no doubt that for some the vote to leave the EU has emboldened their strength and resolve in pursuing independence.

The challenges of this, however, remain as difficult, if not even more so, as they did in 2014. The issues of oil, currency, EU membership and borders remain as controversial, contentious and unresolved now as they did three years ago. In her speech and subsequent Q and A, Sturgeon stressed the importance of presenting the Scottish electorate with facts so that they can make an 'informed choice'. With so many issues of an independent Scotland hanging in the balance, the First Minister will be all too aware that much work remains to be done to tip the balance in her favour.

Notwithstanding some of these 'old' issues, however, any future referendum campaign will no doubt be slightly different. The argument put forward by the pro-Unionists in 2014 that voting 'no' was the best way to ensure continued EU membership stands in tatters. The SNP has unsurprisingly seized upon this issue and has sought to paint a picture of Westminster as a Tory-dominated, intolerant and anti-immigrant government. Sturgeon's quip in her speech that 'the Tories could be in power now at Westminster until 2030 or beyond' hammered home this point. The latter point also underlines another important issue: the collapse of (Scottish) Labour. It seems highly unlikely that Labour would, as was the case in 2014, campaign on the same platform as the Conservatives.

Scottish Labour has been almost entirely squeezed on the constitutional issue in Scotland. The Conservatives are the staunch party of the Union, the SNP the party of independence, and Labour, once the party of devolution, has for some time been wandering in the constitutional wilderness. At the party's recent conference, Scottish Labour endorsed 'federalism' as a '[new political settlement](#)' that would radically overhaul the constitutional architecture of the UK and ultimately render the independence debacle moot. The UK leader, however, failed to mention 'the F

word' in his speech to the same conference, and more recently explained he was '[absolutely fine](#)' with another independence referendum (although these comments were made before Nicola Sturgeon's Indyref2 announcement). It appears that Kezia Dugdale and Jeremy Corbyn are not singing from the same hymn sheet.

Despite Scottish Labour attempting to gain traction on the constitutional issue, there appears to be no agreement between the Scottish party and its UK counterpart. With Scottish Labour trailing in the polls, amidst predictions that it will be trounced in the upcoming local elections, the future position of the party looks bleak. Discussions of federalism, however, a position shared by the Liberal Democrats as well as some Conservatives, may well enable the party to gain some ground. Could it be, for instance, that a second question is included in any future referendum on the issue of a federal UK?

It remains to be seen how the impending Brexit negotiations will influence the independence issue, but a hard Brexit or indeed the prospect of no deal at the end of the negotiations has already fuelled and emboldened SNP demands for another referendum. With the most recent polls showing a slight increase in support for independence, there is no foregone conclusion as to how and when this ongoing constitutional quagmire will be resolved. As the UK Government prepares for the impending Brexit negotiations, ushering in an unequivocal period of political uncertainty, the future of the UK's other and perhaps most important Union, remains under threat. It is a bold move on the part of Sturgeon and she has undoubtedly secured her place in the history books. Only time will tell, however, whether she will be remembered as the First Minister who presided over the independence of Scotland or the leader who got it spectacularly wrong.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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