

What has been going wrong for Scottish Labour?

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11/18/2014

The Scottish Labour Party has been in freefall following the Scottish referendum in September and the resignation of its leader, Johann Lamont. [Eric Shaw](#) explains how the social and institutional supports underpinning Labour rule have steadily unraveled over the last several decades. The grave strategic error made in allying with the Tories and LibDems for the 'No' campaign has also not done Scottish Labour any favours.



Scottish Labour appears to be in crisis. Hardly pausing for breath after its evident triumph over the independence referendum, it now anticipates with trepidation a formidable challenge in the Westminster elections to its parliamentary bastions in West Central Scotland from a resurgent SNP and its allies. Its leader, Johann Lamont, its sixth in fifteen years, has recently resigned and a three way leadership contest between Jim Murphy MP and two MSPs, Neil Findley and Sarah Boyack, is underway. But the SNP are way ahead in the polls.

What has been going wrong? To understand Scottish Labour's plight we need to make a three way distinction: between long-term historical forces, contingent political factors and broader cross-national trends. I will briefly review each in turn.

In a recent study Gerry Hassan and myself chronicled '[The Strange Death of Labour Scotland](#)'. By 'Labour Scotland' we meant something very different and distinct from 'Scottish Labour'. We were not predicting the imminent death of the party as one of Scotland's two major political forces. Rather we were charting the steady unravelling of the social and institutional supports that, for a generation and more, had sustained and underpinned Labour rule in Scotland.

There were three institutional pillars which nourished Labour ascendancy in Scotland: council housing as the dominant form of housing tenure, high trade union membership and a predominantly Labour-run pattern of local government. All were mechanisms by which Labour could entrench itself in the political, economic and social life of Scotland, operating as ways of mobilising and reinforcing the Labour vote and a Labour way of life.

Paradoxically, perhaps the party itself, defined in terms in the size of membership, degree of activism and organisational vibrancy, was always weak, especially in its West Central heartland. But the party was bolstered through an informal and diffuse set of networks and relationships through which its influence was exerted and which integrated it into the tissues of Scottish society.

However Labour Scotland began to unravel from the late 1970s, slowly and unevenly at first then gathering speed in the new millennium. The three pillars of institutional support were progressively dismantled with a rapid shrinkage in the number of council house tenants and trade unionists (especially in the private sector) and then the loss of Labour's local government supremacy. The networks and relationships through which Labour's power was both exercised and replenished began to wither whilst organisationally, in many parts of the country, the party ossified.

The slow demise of 'Labour Scotland' left the party exposed and vulnerable but it was politics that led to the exploitation of this vulnerability. Successive elections since 1999 indicated that Labour support was on a slow, but steady, downward slope and then in 2007 the party was very narrowly ousted from power by the Nationalists. Four years later it was comprehensively defeated with the SNP's victory making a referendum inevitable.

But, with its allies in 'Better Together' Labour fended off the challenge. One might have expected a Labour revival but it hasn't happened. This is in part because the alliance with the Conservatives and the LibDems was a strategic error, enabling the 'Yes' camp to claim that Scottish Labour was in bed with the Tories and the 'Westminster establishment.' Independence became the progressive cause, especially amongst the young. The SNP has now

successfully marketed itself as Scotland's social democrats as well as being the most reliable and sturdy defenders of Scottish interests. Further, the 'Yes' camp proved highly effective in mobilising large numbers of voters, many of whom were not even on the electoral register, thereby producing the highest turnout in any democratic election held in the UK.

There is a third factor that is often overlooked in contemplating the plight of Scottish Labour and it is a comparative one. Though the quick response has been to hold Scottish Labour responsible for its own woes, it is not at all clear that this does not reflect the travails of the party as a whole. Indeed, one can go further: it may well be an aspect of a much broader cross-national phenomenon. Throughout Europe, mainstream social democratic parties (though not the left as a whole) has been suffering a steady and major attrition of support in almost every country. There are no easy answers as to how it can be reversed.

So what should be on the mind of the contenders for Scottish Labour's leadership? It would take more than a blog article to reply to this but at least they can ponder about the following:

- How can it forge a clear and coherent narrative, one both rooted in Scottish Labour's traditions and values, and connected to specifically Scottish conditions?
- Who precisely should Scottish Labour now represent?
- And, above all, what should it stand for?

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