

Labour's leadership election result in Scotland will transform the Scottish political landscape

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Jim Murphy was elected the leader of the Labour party in Scotland. He's tasked with somehow turning around the party's fortunes in Scotland following a precipitous decline in support since the independence referendum. [Norman Bonney](#) thinks Murphy, with his experience and connections, is well suited to re-position Labour and reverse the downward trend.



Jim Murphy, the newly elected Labour Party leader in Scotland, has the capacity to transform the current unprecedented low morale and standing of the party in Scotland. His Westminster and Whitehall experience as well as his extensive networking across Scotland makes him well placed to be the most successful Labour leader under devolution since the Donald Dewar, the first First Minister of the Scottish Government who came to power in 1999 with the initial establishment of Scottish devolution, the details of which he had been heavily involved in designing.

Labour loses the fruits of victory

Having succeeded in the referendum campaign in ensuring that Scotland remained part of the United Kingdom and putting forward proposals for an even stronger Scottish Parliament, the Labour Party in Scotland ought recently to have been celebrating success and future potential. But the resignation of Johann Lamont as Scottish Labour leader in October 2014 demoralised the party and exposed persistent divisions between the wings of the party centred in Westminster and north of the border.

Paradoxically, the nationalist forces that were defeated in their campaign for Scottish independence in the referendum of 18 September 2014 have been able subsequently to claim the moral high ground and the political initiative in Scotland because of Labour's internal difficulties. The Scottish National Party has been energised and reinvigorated and has surged ahead of the Labour Party in the polls and in terms of party membership as a result of the grassroots campaigning for independence which, while not successful, made considerable inroads into heretofore Labour unionist support in the less well-off neighbourhoods of the country. Indeed one [recent opinion poll](#) suggested that the SNP has a substantial 52-23 per cent lead over Scottish Labour in October – a result which could, if continued to May 2014 eliminate most of the party's 41 Labour MPs in Scotland and any potential Labour lead in seats at Westminster.

However, the election of Jim Murphy as Leader of Scottish Labour with an overwhelming mandate of support from the electoral college, especially party members and parliamentarians, and also with substantial support from affiliated trades unions and socialist societies has transformed the Labour Party's prospects in Scotland.

A formidable new leader

Jim Murphy has the potential to make a formidable Scottish Labour leader. Like Donald Dewar who led the devolution campaign that established the Scottish Parliament in 1999 and became its first First Minister, Murphy is greatly experienced in UK Westminster based politics and government as well as being very familiar with the Scottish political scene. As well as holding positions as shadow UK government minister, currently as International Development Secretary, he served as Secretary of State for Scotland in the Gordon Brown UK Government. He will be able to bridge the gap between Holyrood and Westminster that the previous more Scottish based Labour leader Johann Lamont proved unable to span and has the media savvy and political strategy that her predecessor, Iain Gray, lacked, as he led the party to defeat in the Scottish Parliament elections of 2011.

A renewed vision for Scottish labour

While remaining a fervent defender of the union, Murphy has re-appropriated that vocabulary of nationalism, and the need to put Scottish interests first, from the SNP. His primary focus is, however, on the substantial social class differences in, for instance health and education, that still characterise the two 'nations' of Scotland after 15 years of devolution and nearly eight years of minority, and then, from 2011, majority SNP government in Scotland.

He is also conscious of the need for the Scottish Labour Party to restore its traditional support among the Roman Catholic identifying population of Glasgow and surrounding areas where the SNP and the 'Yes' campaign were able to make substantial inroads during the independence referendum campaign. In his acceptance speech he made clear his identification with Glasgow Celtic football club as a gesture in this direction. His well-known personality, campaigns and origins in the Glasgow area will, no doubt, assist in this respect – as will his claim to have been brought up in a Glasgow council estate and his well reported presence assisting at the aftermath of the Clutha bar helicopter crash in the city centre of just over a year ago.

While the myth of the disadvantaged Catholic Scot of Irish origins still has a resonance in Scotland, which the SNP Scottish Government and the 'Yes' campaign attempted to cultivate, the reality is now that this population group has been socially mobile through education and enterprise and now has a social profile that is now the most typically Scottish of any religious group and more open to the Blairite agenda of which the new leader is sometimes accused.

Murphy's extensive networking across Scotland, including his 100 towns' campaign during the referendum period, and his extensive support from MPs, MSPs and party members will serve him well in projecting his leadership across Scotland. Citizens and pundits can be assured that the election of the new leader will result in a transformation of Labour's prospects in Scotland and a far better performance in the May 2015 UK General Election than is suggested by current opinion polls. The New Year will bring new politics to Scotland.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: [eddieizzardfans](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

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