

Scottish Parliament election preview: Continuity and change in the Highlands and Islands

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Highlands and Islands region of Scotland covers an enormous land-mass, much of it extremely sparsely populated and remote. Traditionally, it has been a site of strength for the Liberal Democrats, however that dynamic (other than in the Northern Isles) seems to be changing. Here, **Juliet Swann** looks at the history of Scottish Parliament elections in the region, and previews the individual constituency seats and the list candidates.*



For the first two sessions of the Scottish Parliament (1999 – 2003) the Highlands and Islands region returned five Liberal Democrat constituency MSPs, two SNP constituency and two list MSPs, two Conservative list MSPs, and, three Labour list MSPs and one constituency (although in 2003 Rhoda Grant lost that third list seat to Eleanor Scott for the Greens). Other than that Green contribution to the rainbow Parliament things in Highlands and Islands were altered only by Winnie Ewing choosing not to stand after the death of her husband in a fire accident (with Rob Gibson taking her place), and Duncan Hamilton also deciding not to serve another term, with Jim Mather taking his place. Late in the second term, the death of Margaret Ewing (one of three members of the stalwart SNP family elected in 1999) triggered a by election which was won by Richard Lochhead for the SNP. The Conservative's selected list MSP Mary Scanlon to contest the by-election. She resigned her list seat and was replaced by Dave Petrie.

Change started to be more obvious in 2007, firstly Labour's Alasdair Morrison lost Na h-Eileanan an Iar to the SNP's Alasdair Allan – a situation largely brought about by Morrison's support for an unpopular windfarm on Lewis. Jim Mather also took the seat of Argyll and Bute from Liberal Democrat George Lyon. The Lib Dems held Shetland and Orkney, the latter seeing native Liam McArthur return from a role as a SpAd to replace the retiring leader and Deputy First Minister Jim Wallace. Despite winning two extra constituencies, the SNP continued to hold two list seats, with Rob Gibson joined by Dave Thompson. Rhoda Grant won back her Labour regional seat, bringing their total back to three. Mary Scanlon rejoined Jamie McGrigor after being absent from Holyrood since the Moray by-

election.

In 2011, Rob Gibson won the slightly enlarged Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross seat from the Liberal Democrat's Jamie Stone at the third attempt, and Dave Thompson won Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch (the sitting MSP, popular John Farquhar Munro had stood down and his successor, Alan MacRae stood no chance against the SNP onslaught and the collapse of the Lib Dem vote), pushing the Lib Dems back to their Orkney and Shetland stronghold.

The Conservatives maintained their tally of two list seats, but one of the Labour list seats fell to the SNP, who welcomed three new faces to Holyrood in John Finnie, Jean Urquhart and Mike MacKenzie. The latter is the only one to still be representing the SNP as Jean and John resigned the party whip over the change in SNP policy of an independent Scotland seeking to maintain membership of NATO despite being resolutely anti-nuclear.

Finnie and Urquhart joined forces with the two Green MSPs and Margo MacDonald to form the 'GRINDY' group at Holyrood, along with fellow ex-SNP NATO rebel John Wilson. The two Johns have subsequently joined the Green party and are seeking re-election under that banner. Jean chose to become a member of RISE and tops their list in Highlands and Islands.

Argyll and Bute

Mike Russell moved to the Argyll and Bute constituency from the South of Scotland list in 2007 when sitting MSP Jim Mather chose to stand down. A former Minister in Alex Salmond's Cabinet, he was reshuffled by Nicola Sturgeon when she won the leadership after the referendum.

Previous to the SNP taking the seat, Argyll and Bute was held by the Liberal Democrats George Lyon (who went on to serve as an MEP until the 2014 election when UKIP took the final sixth seat). However, in 2011 the closest challenger to Mike Russell was the Conservative's Jamie McGrigor.

Jamie isn't standing again, and the Conservatives have selected Donald Cameron. Ex- MP, Alan Reid, who lost the sister constituency at the Westminster election last year is hoping he can win the seat back for the Lib Dems. But he won't.

Caithness, Sutherland and Ross

Rob Gibson won a slightly enlarged Caithness, Sutherland and Ross at the third attempt when the Lib Dem's Jamie Stone stood down in 2011. (To be fair to them both, and Jamie's successor, Robbie Rowantree, this probably would have happened regardless). Jamie has since been elected as a local councillor and is fighting the seat again for this Holyrood term. His SNP opponent is not Rob Gibson, as he has in turn decided to retire, and selected in his place (from an All Woman Shortlist – as occurred in all the SNP retiring MSP constituencies) is Gail Ross.

Gail is a local councillor for Wick, and former office manager for the retiring Rob Gibson, so she knows the constituency well, and the constituents know her. It seems unlikely that Jamie will upset Gail's plans to represent her home area at Holyrood, despite his previous success in the constituency. Jamie seems keen to get back to the hustle and bustle of national politics as he is also the lead candidate on the Lib Dem list (more on those chances below).

Inverness and Nairn

Fergus Ewing, son of the late Winnie Ewing and part of the infamous Ewing clan, has steadily increased his majority in this seat and seems unlikely to be troubled by any of his contenders.

Labour's list MSP David Stewart has again been selected to try and close the gap, but he won't. His second place on the list means he should, all being normal (ish), return to Holyrood.

Moray

Another Highlands and Islands constituency which has always been held by the SNP, Richard Lochhead has steadily increased the percentage share of the SNP vote from Margaret Ewing's legacy of 42% to a frankly untouchable 59%.

Like the other Highlands and Islands incumbent SNP MSPs, Richard isn't standing on the list, but you can guarantee he'll be back at Holyrood.

Na h-Eileanan an Iar

Alasdair Allan's majority may seem small compared to some of his Highland and Island colleagues, but in fact he won 65% of the vote in 2011.

The beaten Labour candidate, Alasdair Morrison, lost the seat by only 720 in 2007. It seems highly unlikely that Labour's Rhoda Grant will win the Western Isles back, even with her reputation thanks to her long-standing list seat. She is the lead list candidate for Labour so will be back at Holyrood.

Orkney

It says a lot about the distinct political character of the Northern Isles that the second placed candidate in the Orkney constituency in 2011 was an Independent, local councillor James Stockan. Most of the local councillors stand as independent candidates, albeit their affiliations may be known locally. The SNP candidate, Donna Heddie was only 8 votes behind James. She is standing again in 2016, as is the 2011 Conservative candidate, Jamie-Halcro Johnston.

James' tally in 2007 did effectively split the Lib Dem vote, so its harder to predict what will happen without that choice on offer to Orcadians. Yes, the Lib Dem vote fell by 20% in the Westminster election in 2015 – but that was stretched across both Northern Isles. And Orkney voted against independence in the referendum by 67% to 33%.

But then there's the Alistair Carmichael factor. Before the 2015 General Election, the former Secretary of State for Scotland admitted leaking a (false as it turned out) memo stating that Nicola Sturgeon would rather see David Cameron than Ed Miliband in Downing Street as the former made independence more likely. The Lib Dems vote collapsed and the Tories won the election. Not the end of the story. Alistair's majority in Orkney and Shetland fell from 9,928 in 2010 to just 817 in 2015. He was the single Liberal Democrat to be returned to Westminster from Scotland – a result widely seen as 'punishment' for the coalition and inflicting 'Tory-rule' on non-Conservative voting Scotland. A group of disgruntled voters, with the assistance of an internationally supported crowdfunding campaign, took Carmichael to a special election court, alleging the deceit was against the conduct of elections. To cut a long story short, Carmichael wasn't found guilty, the Westminster authorities have declined to investigate and he remains the MP.

So a lot depends on whether Orkney supports the Lib Dems despite everything, and Liam personally, whether Donna can make the most of the national collapse in the Lib Dem vote, and whether Orkney can send a nationalist to Holyrood without supporting independence.

Shetland

Again a small number belies a large percentage share of a small electorate. Tavish Scott won 48% of the vote in 2011, and, as on Orkney, the second placed candidate was an Independent councillor, Billy Fox. (Incidentally the third placed SNP candidate was lead RISE list candidate Jean Urquhart). Again as on Orkney, it was the independent candidate who took a large chunk of Tavish's votes, with the SNP vote share actually falling slightly. Shetland voted No in the independence referendum by 64% to 36%.

But, everything we described in that Orkney section about the Alistair Carmichael effect obviously also applies in

Shetland. In fact, perhaps even more so as the SNP candidate in Shetland is Danus Skene, the man who lost to Carmichael. Will Tavish's personal popularity hold out? Will the islanders take a chance on the SNP for the first time? For how predictably Lib Dem both Orkney and Shetland have been for so long, this year they are worth watching

Skye, Badenoch and Lochaber

Dave Thompson has increased the SNP vote by about 5000 each of the three times he has stood in the constituency, finally winning the seat in 2011 when the ancient (as defined by my grandfather) John Farquhar Munro stood down. Thompson has decided not to stand again, and the SNP have selected Kate Forbes from an All Woman Shortlist. Kate was born in Dingwall, speaks Gaelic, and has worked for Dave in the constituency.

The Lib Dems came second in Skye, Badenoch and Lochaber in 2011, and this year they are represented by local councillor Angela Maclean. Independent candidate Ronnie Campbell looks unlikely to have the same impact as we saw with Independents in Orkney and Shetland as he only picked up 490 votes in 2011. Like all but the Orkney and Shetland SNP candidates, Forbes isn't standing on the SNP list but I would expect her to be joining the SNP benches in May.

Regional seats

The Highlands and Islands list has remained pretty similar over the years, but with two of the SNP list members resigning from the party to stand for the Greens (John Finnie) and RISE (Jean Urquhart), and the Liberal Democrat hold on Orkney and Shetland looking weaker than it has ever been, the one thing that can be guaranteed on the Highlands and Islands list is new faces.

If Orkney and Shetland stay true to form we can expect the SNP to repeat their three list seats, with Maree Todd and Laura Mitchell taking seats as the first and second placed candidates. Incumbent Mike MacKenzie will have a longer wait to see if the divided SNP total remains more than any of the smaller parties.

However, if the SNP manage to win Orkney and Shetland, then McKenzie is much less likely to need to bother hanging around, and it will be Laura who waits to see the extent of the smaller party vote share. Maree Todd may well win an SNP list seat even if the SNP win all the constituencies, such is the party's strength on the mainland. If the seats split the difference and one stays Lib Dem and one goes SNP. Well, then that will be even more interesting!

Labour and the Conservatives will win at least one list seat each – so Rhoda Grant will be back, and the Conservative's lead candidate, Douglas Ross, should be making plans to come to Edinburgh. Douglas is a local councillor and has previously stood for the party at the Westminster election in 2010 and 2015. He [lost his position](#) as convenor of the council planning committee following an internal row over school closures. Douglas is perhaps slightly more likely to be joined by second placed Conservative list candidate Edward Mountain than Rhoda is to have her colleague David Stewart back with her, but without a doubt it is the last two list seats that will be the most unpredictable.

Although the Greens haven't had a list MSP since the 2003 session, John Finnie is known locally. Equally, RISE have yet to show much of an impact in the polls, but Jean Urquhart is a familiar face. And, if the Lib Dems do lose Orkney and Shetland, lead list candidate Jamie Stone will be hoping he can squeeze in at the bottom of the list. As if that wasn't exciting enough, David Coburn is standing for UKIP. Whilst he is widely derided as "gash" (at least according to Kezia Dugdale), that didn't stop him winning the final MEP seat in 2014, and he probably won't have picked Highlands and Islands without some forethought. Certainly some areas in the region placed UKIP ahead of the Greens, Lib Dems, and in Aberdeenshire ahead of Labour in the European elections in 2014.

A final point is that counting always takes longer in Highlands and Islands because of that geographic size we mentioned so be prepared to wait until later in the morning of 6th May for the final result – or indeed tea time. In 2007 I was cycling home from work before Highlands and Islands list vote was declared, and it changed the result of

the election.

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