

# Scottish Parliament Election preview: Whatever happens in Lothians, we're bound to see new faces

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Scottish Parliamentary region of Lothians contains Edinburgh, as well as some surrounding areas. It was in this region that Labour saw their only MP elected at the 2015 General Election, however the SNP dominated the other seats. Will we see a rerun this May? Here, **Juliet Swann** runs the contests in the region, and observes that no matter which party prospers, it will be sending new faces to Holyrood.*



The Lothian region includes all of the capital's constituencies and stretches into West Lothian with the constituencies of Linlithgow and Almond Valley and East Lothian by way of the constituency of North Midlothian and Musselburgh.

The first Scottish Parliament elections saw all but one of the Lothians (as it was then known) constituencies return Labour MSPs. The exception was the Liberal Democrat seat of Edinburgh West. Indeed, until the 2007 election Edinburgh West had been a Liberal Democrat stronghold in both Holyrood and Westminster, Donald Gorrie having won the seat from James Douglas-Hamilton in 1997. The SNP landslide in 2015 took the seat from the sitting Lib Dem MP, Mike Crockart, with only a 6% majority.

Since that first election, most of the Lothian seats have stayed Labour, although in 2003 the well-heeled Edinburgh Pentlands striking out and electing a Conservative (David McLetchie), and Edinburgh South fell to the Lib Dem's Mike Pringle. In 2007 Livingston and Edinburgh East were part of the SNP growth in constituency wins, with Angela Constance becoming a new MSP and Kenny MacAskill moving from the regional list, replacing Susan Deacon who stood down that year, her Labour successor Norman Murray, an unpopular local councillor, finishing second, with 1,382 fewer votes.

Then in 2011, Lothian's constituencies were engulfed in the SNP tidal wave, except Edinburgh North and Leith which the popular Malcolm Chisholm held for Labour with a slim majority over Shirley-Anne Somerville (who lost her

seat on the list because of that wave of success but looks set to return as the representative for Dunfermline).

The Lothian regional list has remained fairly balanced between Labour and the Conservatives since 1999, as well as showing some variety by returning Scotland's first Green MSP, Robin Harper, in 1999; the Socialist Party's Colin Fox in 2003 and the much missed Independent, Margo MacDonald (whose seat incidentally, has remained vacant since her death in 2014). Both the Conservative list MSPs are standing down, making room for the coast-switching party leader, Ruth Davidson, and probably allowing party staffer Miles Briggs a seat in the chamber after a number of attempts. What happens to Margo's votes is a key point of interest in the Lothian regional vote. She was elected at stage four so how those votes are distributed could see any one of the other parties claiming a seat.

So what does all this suggest is at stake in Lothian in 2016?

### **Edinburgh Northern and Leith**

The solitary non-SNP constituency MSP, Malcolm Chisholm, retired at the end of the 2016 session. His seat is being contested for Labour by local councillor Lesley Hinds. Lesley has the dubious honour of supervising the closing stages of the tram construction and has previously stood for the Westminster seat of Edinburgh East. The SNP candidate is Ben MacPherson. A good bellwether for the constituency is the 2015 Westminster election which saw SNP councillor Deirdre Brock from Australia push Mark Lazarowicz, also popular locally, into second place. Without Malcolm's popularity pushing up the Labour vote, Ben should win Edinburgh Northern and bring his legal training to Holyrood.

### **Edinburgh Central**

Edinburgh Central is also bound to see a new MSP as Marco Biagi is leaving Holyrood for academia. However, of the six candidates, three are well kent faces with Ruth Davidson, the Conservative party leader contesting this constituency after moving over from the Glasgow list. She is joined by Sarah Boyack for Labour who held the constituency from 1999 until the SNP landslide and a boundary change saw her keep her place in the Parliament as a regional MSP. Alison Johnstone, the Green Lothian MSP is also standing in Edinburgh Central – one of only two constituencies the Greens are contesting (the other being Glasgow Kelvin where Patrick Harvie). Marco's successor for the SNP is Alison Dickie – selected from an All Woman Shortlist (all retiring SNP MSP seats were subject to AWS), and the Liberal Democrat's Hannah Bettsworth is seeking election (again).

The current SNP majority in Edinburgh Central is only 237, making this seat theoretically winnable for Sarah Boyack. Both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives had a decent showing in 2011, and with the Greens potentially taking some Yes supporting votes, this is a seat to watch. That said, Alison Dickie will probably take the seat, although that won't stop her challengers taking their place in the Parliament Chamber as Sarah Boyack, Ruth Davidson and Alison Johnstone are all also standing on the regional list (Ruth and Alison will definitely be returned as the lead list candidate for their parties, Sarah faces a less certain evening / early morning of May 6<sup>th</sup> as she is sitting behind Kezia Dugdale and Neil Findlay on the Labour list). Interestingly Alison Dickie is not an SNP regional candidate so if she does fail to win the seat it'll be back to teaching.

### **Edinburgh Eastern**

This coastal constituency which encompasses both the increasingly gentrified Portobello, the village-like Duddingston and the less privileged areas of Craigtinny and Criagmillar will also have a new representative at Holyrood as Kenny MacAskill, who has held the seat since 2007, has retired. His SNP successor, also selected from an All Woman Shortlist is Ash Regan-Denham, who works for the pro-independence think tank, Common Weal. After a couple of Labour councillors standing in the past two Holyrood elections, the Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale has been selected to fight this seat in 2016. Ash and Kezia are unlikely to be troubled by the Conservative or Liberal Democrat candidates in this seat, which until Kenny's 2007 win had been comfortably Labour since 1924. There's always a chance that Kezia's national presence will benefit her at the local ballot box, but as the first capital

constituency to turn to the SNP it seems likely that Ash Regan-Denham will win this seat. As the lead candidate on the Labour regional list, even if she does lose, Kezia will be a second place winner thanks to the Additional Member System.

### **Edinburgh Pentlands**

The area of the capital with the strongest Conservative vote, Edinburgh Pentlands was held by the late David McLetchie until 2011 when Gordon MacDonald won the seat for the SNP leaping from third place in 2007, leaving the Conservatives over 1000 votes behind. Without the former party leader and popular local candidate standing for the Conservatives it seems unlikely that Gordon MacDonald's position will be usurped. His Conservative challenger is also called Gordon (so that might cause a few stray votes). Gordon Lindhurst is an advocate who stood for the seat of Edinburgh South West (which includes Edinburgh Pentlands) in the Westminster election last year when he came third behind Labour's Ricky Henderson (succeeding Alistair Darling) and the SNP's Joanna Cherry who won almost as many votes as the Labour and Conservative candidates added together.

### **Edinburgh Southern**

Both the Scottish Parliament constituency of Edinburgh Southern and the Westminster cousin Edinburgh South are renowned as marginal constituencies. Indeed, Edinburgh South is infamous as one of the three Westminster seats not to be won by the SNP in 2015, with Labour's Ian Murray increasing his majority to 2,637. Ian won the seat by only 316 votes in 2010, with the Liberal Democrats placing a close second and the Conservative's Neil Hudson coming in third ahead of the SNP. The results in 2015 suggest many Liberal Democrat and Conservative voters 'lean' their vote to Labour to avoid the unpopular SNP candidate, Neil Hay, from taking the seat. (Neil had been exposed as the author of an anonymous twitter account which was rude and abusive towards and about supporters of the union).

As for the Westminster election, despite marginality, the winner of this seat remains predictable as a man, it being the only Lothian seat without a woman candidate. Further familiarity abounds in the Liberal Democrat and Conservative candidates, Pramod Subbaraman and Miles Briggs respectively who reprieve their challenge from last year. But after years as a three way marginal, and despite the incredibly close result between all four candidates in 2011, it seems inevitable that Edinburgh Southern is now definitely a two horse race. Labour will hope they can repeat their success of 2015 with their candidate, businessman Daniel Johnson beating the sitting MSP Jim Eadie, but they will need the support of those leaning voters from last year to do so. Daniel is also placed fourth on the Labour regional list so even if he loses stands a slim chance of getting a regional seat. Miles Briggs on the other hand is very likely to take a regional seat even if he fails to win votes in the constituency as the Conservatives have placed him second on the list, behind Ruth Davidson.

### **Edinburgh Western**

Heading West, we come to the former Liberal Democrat stronghold of Edinburgh Western. The SNP's Colin Keir is has stood down, making way for the Yes campaign's head of interest groups and SNP MEP candidate Toni Giugliano, who is looking to hold on to the seat the party won from the Lib Dem's Margaret Smith by almost 3000 votes (Margaret won the previous election in a pre-boundary change Edinburgh West by almost 6000 votes).

Determined to stop him and win the seat back for the Liberal Democrats is Alex Cole-Hamilton. Alex has stood for the Liberal Democrats a number of times and will be hoping that this historically Lib Dem leaning seat, the ongoing investigation around sitting MP Michelle Thomson (who has resigned the SNP party whip), and his position at the top of the Liberal Democrat list bring his seeking election to a successful end.

### **Almond Valley**

Almond Valley was created in 2011, comprising much of the old Livingston constituency. Angela Constance won Livingston from Labour's Bristow Muldoon in 2007 with a four vote majority, and held the re-drawn Almond Valley in

2011 with a much more comfortable 5,542 lead. Known for her eclectic footwear (she [auctioned a pair of Irregular Choice 'Bambi' heels for the charity Shoe Aid UK](#)), Angela has served as Education Secretary under First Minister Nicola Sturgeon. Almond Valley is another seat with a strong Labour background (the Westminster constituency was held by Robin Cook until his death), and with little interest in voting for the Liberal Democrats or the Conservatives. Labour have chosen left-wing firebrand Neil Findlay to challenge Angela for the seat. A keen supporter of Jeremy Corbyn, and [unafraid to cause controversy in the Parliamentary Chamber](#), Neil will be hoping his outspoken nature carries him favour against someone who hit the headlines for all the wrong reasons when she [asked to restart a live television interview](#). Angela is the lead candidate for the SNP regional list so stands a very good chance of returning to Holyrood regardless.

## Linlithgow

After coming in second to Labour's Mary Mulligan in 2003 and 2007, Fiona Hyslop won the re-drawn constituency for the SNP in 2011 after serving as a regional MSP since 1999. This year her Labour challenger is Angela Boyd-Moohan. Angela is currently one of the local councillors for the Livingston North ward in West Lothian council. The SNP's Martyn Day effectively reversed the Labour and SNP position in the Westminster constituency last year, winning 52% of the vote (Labour's Michael Connarty had won 50% to the SNP's 25% in 2010), so Angela has something of an uphill battle to defeat Fiona. That said, Ms Hyslop is taking no chances and is standing at number two in the regional Lothian list.

## Midlothian North and Musselburgh

The Southern-most seat of the Lothian region was won by Colin Beattie for the SNP in 2011. He moved from second place behind Labour's Rhona Brankin who had held the seat since 1999 until she retired in 2011. His almost 3000 majority ahead of the same Labour candidate who is hoping to unseat him this year should be increased if the polls are to be believed. That Labour candidate is trade union activist Bernard Harkins who will hope the traditional Labour constituency built on coal mining will value this background ahead of banker Beattie. Midlothian was another massive SNP win in the General Election last year, with novice Owen Thompson taking over 50% of the vote share.

## Regional Seats

As well as the main parties, the newly formed RISE, the Scottish Women's Equality Party, Solidarity and UKIP are also standing on the Lothian regional list. None are likely to win enough votes to challenge either the Greens or the Liberal Democrats for their first list seat, nor SNP, Conservative or Labour even once their list vote is divided as they win seats.

If all goes as predicted the regional seats will probably be taken by Ruth Davidson and Miles Briggs at one and two on the Conservative list, Alison Johnstone at number one on the Green list, Alex Cole-Hamilton at number one on the Liberal Democrat list and Kezia Dugdale, Neil Findlay and Sarah Boyack at one, two and three on the Labour list.

The SNP are predicted to win all nine of the constituencies, so their list vote will automatically be divided by ten, probably taking their total to below the Liberal Democrats, but not necessarily. If they can still exceed the Liberal Democrat total even once the d'Hondt division has been applied then previously unknown SNP list candidate Jil Murphy could find herself elected.

Equally, if Labour do manage to win one or more of the constituencies it could affect their list performance, to the benefit of the Liberal Democrats or the SNP. As mentioned, a lot of this uncertainty around the final few list seats to be allocated in Lothian depends on what voters who previously supported Margo MacDonald decided to do.

Whatever happens, Lothians looks set to send a number of new faces to Holyrood on May 5<sup>th</sup> / 6<sup>th</sup>.

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**Juliet Swann** is an elections expert who has worked at the Electoral Reform Society Scotland and the Citizens Advice Bureau.