

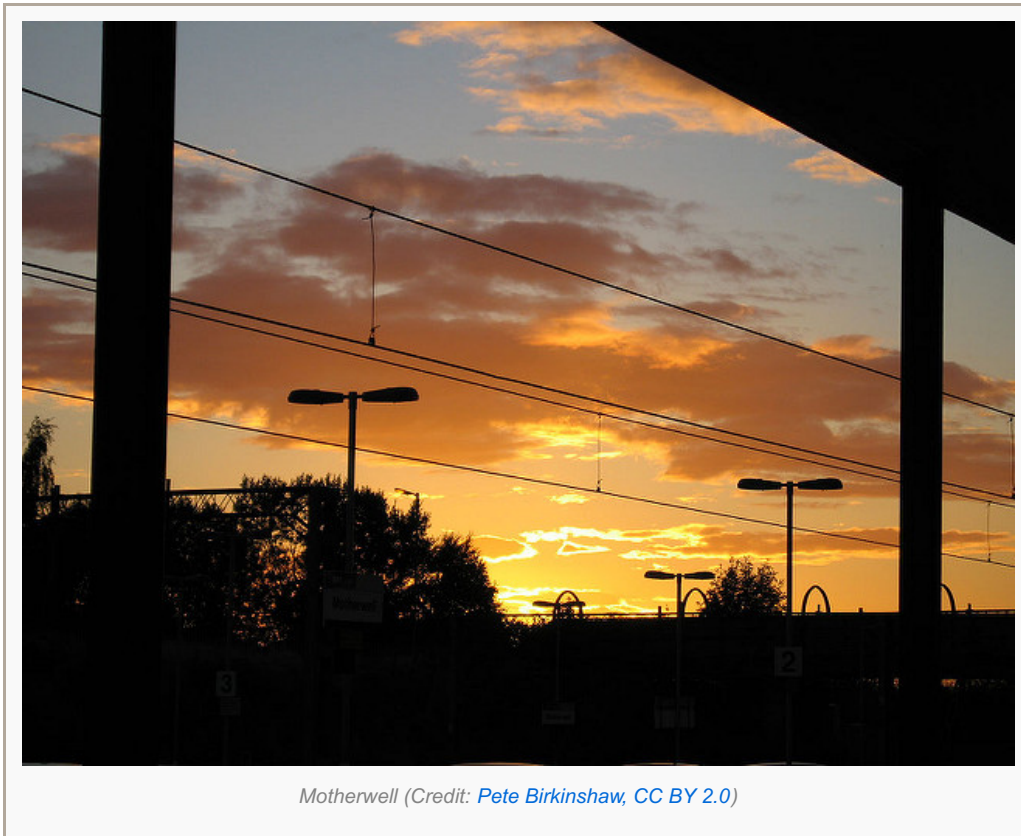
Scottish Parliament election preview: the last beats of a Labour ‘heartland’ in Central Scotland?

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Scottish Parliament elections take place early next month, with the SNP expected to solidify their dominance in the post-referendum Scotland. The Central Scotland region has long been a Labour stronghold with the party’s legendary and revered first leader Keir Hardie from the area. Here, **Judith Sijstermans** previews the contests, and suggests that this election may represent the ‘last beats’ of the Labour ‘heartland’.*



The Central Scotland region is the birthplace of the Labour Party’s first leader Keir Hardie and forms part of what used to be seen as solidly Scottish Labour Party “heartland.” However, Central Scotland was decisively changed by the 2011 elections. In those elections, the SNP gained 5 constituency seats from Labour. Two more of Labour’s remaining three MSPs in Central Scotland won on precarious margins. Motherwell and Wishaw Labour MSP John Pentland won by only 587 votes (2.4%) and Uddingston and Bellshill Labour MSP Michael McMahon won by only 714 votes (2.8%).

The 2011 elections also suggest that it is unlikely that this region will contribute to attempts by the [Tories to overtake Labour](#) in opposition. In 2011, both the Conservative constituency vote in Central Scotland (7.24%) and the Central Scotland regional list vote (6.4%) were only half of the Tories’ national average. As such, it seems that any shift away from the Labour Party in Central Scotland will likely benefit the SNP. Recent council [by-elections](#) following the General Election illustrate this, with swings from Labour to the SNP of 23% (Falkirk), 21% (Wishaw), 16% (Hamilton), and 25% (Thorniewood, North Lanarkshire). Furthermore, incumbent SNP MSPs’ average lead on Labour competitors in 2011 was 11.4%. It would be an upset if all of Central Scotland’s SNP MSPs were not returned to the Scottish Parliament.

The narrative of Labour's [collapse](#) in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election shouldn't come as a shock to those who have followed politics in Central Scotland. The shift of left wing voters to the SNP was signposted by then Labour MP Dennis Canavan in 1999. Canavan ran for the Scottish Parliament in 1999 as an independent, ultimately being expelled from the Labour Party, after he [had been told](#) by a Labour selection panel that he did not suit the party's platform. Canavan ultimately won the largest majority in Scotland in 1999. His fight to preserve what he saw as "traditional" Labour values ultimately led him to become a backer of the Yes campaign and the SNP. Election results suggest that, at least in the case of support for the SNP, the voters of Central Scotland have followed in Canavan's footsteps.

The question for Central Scotland in 2016 is two-fold. First, how complete is the Scottish voter's rejection of the Labour Party? Second, what kind of politics, and particularly what kind of Labour politics, will remain in Scotland after May 5th? Both Labour and SNP candidates in the region show that the left wing traditions of politicians like Hardie and Canavan remain dominant in Central Scotland. This continuity in ideology, if not party loyalty, may be best understood through a look at Central Scotland's key seats and issues.

[Airdrie and Shotts](#)

Airdrie and Shotts was deeply affected by the decline of heavy industry (quarrying and mining). Thus it's perhaps not surprising that its two leading candidates are related to the more liberal strands of their parties. The Airdrie and Shotts incumbent is Alex Neil, Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities & Pensioners' Rights. Neil was briefly a researcher for the Labour Party before a (failed) attempt to found a Scottish Labour Party with Jim Sillars in the 1970s. Even after joining the SNP, Neil remained to the left of the party. He served as Central Scotland regional MSP from 1999 to 2011, when he won the Airdrie and Shotts seat with an 8.4% lead on his Labour opponent. Neil is likely to be re-elected considering his already substantial lead and the fact that Airdrie and Shotts registered a 30.4% swing to the SNP in the General Election.

Nonetheless, he is also likely to see his opponent, Richard Leonard, in the Scottish Parliament. Leonard has strong labour union credentials. He is a former chairperson of the Scottish Labour Party, former Assistant Secretary of the Scottish TUC and a current GMB union organizer. He also received the [endorsement](#) of the Unite Union (which withheld support from all the sitting MSPs except Elaine Smith). Leonard [benefitted from a rule change](#) in the Labour Party which meant that sitting MSPs were no longer guaranteed top spots on the regional list. Combined with a slight boost from new members that joined during the [Labour leadership election](#), Leonard took the first spot on the Central Scotland regional list, bypassing all incumbent Labour MSPs. He has [critiqued](#) budget cuts to councils and promoted a platform of jobs and regeneration. He may be hoping to build on concerns about council budget cuts that were highlighted by Lanarkshire Labour councilors' [protests](#) at the Scottish Parliament late in 2015.

[Coatbridge and Chryston](#)

Elaine Smith has held the Coatbridge and Chryston Scottish Parliament seat since the opening of the Parliament in 1999. Smith has [conceded](#) that the Labour Party "have a huge challenge facing us in these elections." Given the size of the swings to the SNP in other elections, even her comfortable 2011 lead (11.7%) may not be enough to guarantee her the constituency seat. Smith has [called](#) for the Scottish Labour Party to take a new direction. She backed Neil Findlay in the leadership election, is a part of the Campaign for Socialism, and [signed](#) an SNP motion against the renewal of Trident. As such, despite her more [conservative social views](#), Smith follows in the Central Scotland tradition of a more socialist Labour Party ideology. Along with her long history as Coatbridge and Chryston MSP, this may help her weather the challenge from SNP Councillor Fulton MacGregor. MacGregor will be further hindered in his challenge to Smith due to [infighting](#) which has led to the suspension of the Coatbridge and Chryston SNP branch.

[East Kilbride](#)

East Kilbride is the SNP's most marginal seat in Central Scotland, with incumbent Linda Fabiani winning with a

6.5% lead over her Labour opponent in 2011. Fabiani will face Labour's LizAnne Handibode and Conservative Councillor Graham Simpson (who also ran in 2011) this May. South Lanarkshire Council worker Handibode **beat** sitting regional MSP Margaret McCulloch in the race for the constituency nomination.

Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse

Margaret McCulloch, who lives in East Kilbride, will now contest the less marginal Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse seat against Christina McKelvie (who won with an 8.7% lead in 2011). She was selected for the seat after Councilor Jackie Burns stepped down from the candidacy. Her low place on the regional list (6th) mean her return to the Scottish Parliament would rely on a large (and unlikely) swing to Labour.

Falkirk West

Falkirk West is a very safe seat for the SNP, which incumbent Michael Matheson (also Cabinet Secretary for Justice) will be counting on. Like Cumbernauld and Kilsyth incumbent Minister for Sport, Health Improvement and Mental Health Jamie Hepburn, Matheson **chose** not to stand for the SNP's regional list. He will rely on his ability to win the constituency seat which he easily won Falkirk West in 2011, with 55% of the vote—20% more than his Labour opponent.

Matheson's security in the seat is only compounded by the difficulties the Labour Party has faced in Falkirk West, with **Eric Joyce** as their former MP, and selection scandals making **national headlines** during the 2015 selection process. Furthermore, there were **reports** that Labour struggled to fill the seat. The challenge to Matheson now comes from Mandy Telford, former President of the National Union of Students and former Cumbria Councillor, who **moved back to Scotland** after campaigning in the referendum campaign.

Uddingston and Bellshill

Labour candidate Michael McMahon is the incumbent in the Uddingston and Bellshill constituency, although he had only a slim majority of 2.8% in 2011, making this a key target seat for the SNP. SNP regional incumbent MSP Richard Lyle will contest the seat. Like Adamson he will need to make an SNP gain to be returned to the Parliament, since he holds only the 9th place on the regional list. However, Lyle's campaign has been **marred by infighting** with North Lanarkshire SNP Councillor David Baird. Given these internal disagreements, if the SNP aim to make constituency seat gains in Central Scotland, two key constituencies where they might do so (Uddingston and Bellshill/Coatbridge and Chryston) may rely more on national swings than the strength local organizing.

Motherwell and Wishaw

The Motherwell and Wishaw constituency includes the closed site of the Ravenscraig steel plant, widely seen as a symbol of the decline of heavy industry in Scotland. Before 2011, the seat was solidly Labour with former First Minister Jack McConnell winning his seat in 2007 with 48.4% of the vote (23% more than his SNP opponent). However, incumbent MSP John Pentland won the seat in 2011 by only 587 votes (2.4%) against Clare Adamson, who subsequently took a regional seat.

In late 2015, steel re-emerged as a prominent issue in the constituency when Tata Steel announced it would be closing their Dalzell plant, leading to the loss of 270 jobs. The Scottish Government initially provided a £190,000 support package for the Dalzell and Clydebridge Works which incumbent John Pentland called a **'token gesture.'** However, even Pentland **welcomed** the Scottish Government's most recent announcement that it would buy the steel plants and sell them on to Liberty House. This last minute good news story for the Scottish Government and his slim majority may not bode well for Pentland's re-election prospects. Regional MSP Adamson is once again contesting the seat and considering Pentland's slim majority, Adamson has a good chance of winning. Both Pentland and Adamson will be relying on the constituency win in order to be re-elected, since they both have relatively low spots (7th) on their party's regional list.

Regional Seats

The d'Hondt system means that parties who have already won constituency seats will be less likely to be allocated regional seats—balancing the first past the post system. For example, in 2011, the SNP lost 2 regional seats in Central Scotland due to their 5 constituency seat gains. Given John Swinney's [recent claim](#) that the SNP will seek to win all 73 constituencies in Scotland and likely gains, regional seats are likely to shift towards the Labour Party (Winning all the constituency seats in a region and a regional list seat isn't an impossible feat, as the election of Mark McDonald MSP from the North East regional list in 2011 highlighted.)

Like Richard Leonard, South Lanarkshire [Councillor Monica Lennon](#) was placed before all sitting MSPs to take second place on the list. Lennon was previously a town planner who worked in the public and private sector, before being elected to the council in 2012. Lennon and Leonard are both likely to get elected on the list. Incumbent regional MSP Mark Griffin is likely to join them considering it is unlikely that he will overturn Cumbernauld and Kilsyth MSP Jamie Hepburn's 12.7% lead. The Conservatives are unlikely to either make substantial gains or lose ground in Central Scotland. As such, Margaret Mitchell is likely to be re-elected as a regional MSP and (depending on the extent of Labour's losses) she may be joined by Councillor Graham Simpson who has [claimed](#) that in Central Scotland, "the Tory vote has held up well."

While the Tory vote may remain steady, the true interest of the 2016 Scottish Parliament is whether the Labour Party will hold on to any of their constituency seats. Can those marginal Labour constituency MSPs hold on or will the national level swings in public opinion bode too strong? Whether or not Labour manages to keep any constituency seats in Central Scotland, the selection of union organizer Richard Leonard and relatively unknown 'rising star' Monica Lennon suggests that the Labour party left in the Scottish Parliament may look quite different than the current parliamentary group. The left-wing positions of Central Scotland's SNP and Labour candidates within their own parties highlight that the political culture of the region's voters may be more stable than dramatic vote swings suggest.

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