

Scots are not becoming more conservative: three factors behind the Tory 'revival' in North East Scotland



Twenty years after losing all of their Scottish seats, the 2017 general election gave 13 MPs to the Conservatives. Was that because Scotland is becoming more conservative? The factors behind the revival look to be more Unionist than conservative, explains [Malcolm Harvey](#), with Indyref2, Brexit, and SNP's governing competence being the most significant.

One of the remarkable stories of the 2017 UK General Election was the Conservative revival in Scotland. Twelve gains in all, and a return to being the second-placed party in share of the vote shows just how substantial that revival was. And indeed, some of the results were significant in their size and swing, particularly in the North-East of Scotland, which has, for so long, been an area of strength for the SNP.

Six of the seven North East seats turned blue on election night. The smallest majority overturned was the 7,033 Stuart Donaldson was defending in West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine. The Conservatives' Andrew Bowie won it with a majority of 7,929. A remarkable reversal of fortunes – and this was the seat with the smallest majority they were able to overcome. The largest was in Banff and Buchan, where Eilidh Whiteford was defending a five figure majority – 14,339 – and still lost. And the Conservatives didn't just squeak home in these seats either – David Duguid, the new MP for Banff and Buchan, now holds a majority of 3,693. SNP stalwarts Alex Salmond, Angus Robertson, and Mike Weir all saw majorities of over 8,500 wiped out by a rising Conservative vote, each replaced by Conservative MPs with majorities of at least 2,500.

Recent Scottish electoral behaviour should have cautioned us to expect significant swings on election night, and not to treat significant majorities as relatively secure. Nevertheless, the scale of the Conservative revival in some of these seats is quite incredible. In Gordon, the Conservatives polled a poor third in 2015, almost 21,000 votes behind Alex Salmond, and yet triumphed by 2,600 votes in 2017. Similarly, in Aberdeen South, the SNP had romped home in 2015 ahead of outgoing Labour MP Anne Begg, with the Conservatives some 9,000 votes behind in third place. Ross Thomson's majority is now 4,752. In each of the other four seats, the Conservatives had finished in second place in 2015 and so were the SNP's closest challengers, but in were still some distance behind.

How do we account for such a reversal? There seem to be three significant factors. First, unsurprisingly, the issue of a second independence referendum looks to have significantly motivated Conservative voting. I live in the Gordon constituency and I can testify to the fact that Conservative election literature focused not on their own policy objectives – I'm not even sure what the party stood for was mentioned – but upon their opposition to 'Indyref2'. In one of these leaflets, there were more pictures of First Minister Nicola Sturgeon than there were of the local candidate. This clearly resonated, and not just with Conservative voters. Gordon was, historically, a Liberal Democrat seat, but they collapsed to fourth place, losing 13,000 votes in the process, with much of that vote moving tactically to the Conservatives in a bid to avoid a second independence referendum.

Second, the national picture looks to have played a key role. While both Alex Salmond and Angus Robertson have large profiles as leading SNP figures at Westminster, the seats they represented both include significant proportions of farmers and fishermen. Neither of these groups have been particularly enthralled with the work of the SNP Scottish Government recently – the former as a result of delays to CAP payments and the latter with regards to the SNP's attempts to maintain Scotland's place in the EU single market. Across the North-East, agriculture is a substantial part of the local economy, and as a result, many farmers who recently voted SNP have returned to their traditional home in the Conservatives.

Third, Brexit also had an influence. Psephologist extraordinaire [Professor John Curtice](#) has indicated that Brexit was less of an issue in Scotland than it was south of the border, and this is true across the country – Indyref2 was the more significant factor. However, it is clear that in seats like Banff & Buchan, this was a contributory factor in the Conservative revival. According to [Chris Hanretty's](#) data, Banff & Buchan returned a 61% vote in favour of Brexit, making it the only seat in Scotland to do so. Fishermen there are [significantly anti-EU](#) and did not trust the SNP to move the UK out of the Common Fisheries Policy.

Twenty years after losing all of their Scottish representation, the Conservative revival in Scotland kicked into gear, with 13 MPs returned to the House of Commons. Nevertheless, be wary of explaining this as a small-c conservative revival, or of Scotland becoming a 'conservative' country. The factors behind the revival – particularly in the North-East – look to be more Unionist than conservative, with Indyref2 and Brexit, as well as SNP governing competence all significant factors. And while the constitution remains *the* game in Scottish politics, this might serve Ruth Davidson's party well. But if we return to politics based more on socio-economic issues, particularly if the 'Corbyn surge' reaches this far north, where does that leave the Scottish Conservatives?

About the Author



[Malcolm Harvey](#) is a Teaching Fellow in Politics at the University of Aberdeen.

Featured image credit: [stux](#), Pixabay/Public Domain