

More devolution rather than independence: time for the SNP to rediscover the 'middle way'



The fall in support, and considerable loss of Parliamentary representation, for the Scottish National Party in the 2017 general election, throws the immediate future of the pro-independence project into some doubt. [Mark Simpson](#) suggests that nationalists need to play a longer game, focusing for now on getting the devolved powers they need to create a more equal Scotland within the UK.

It is clear that the 2017 general election result calls for a period of reflection on the part of Scottish nationalists – and, perhaps, a shift in focus away from independence and towards the devolution settlement.

First, matters should be kept in perspective. Prior to 2015, the Scottish National Party's strongest performance in a UK general election had seen them win 11 seats. The party's share of the popular vote had never topped 30% in any election before 2007.

So to describe the pro-independence party's result of 8 June as a defeat in any sense would be implausible. Key figures, including Alex Salmond and Angus Robertson, lost their seats, but 37% of the Scottish vote and more than half of Scotland's 59 Westminster seats is a good election in anyone's language. The loss of 21 seats is due in large measure to an electoral system that amplifies small swings in the votes cast. To take 95% of the seats with 50% of the votes cast, as the SNP did in 2015, is an affront to democracy and the party remains over-represented in Parliament.

More important from the point of view of Scotland's constitutional future is the fall in the nationalists' share of the popular vote to 37%, with the Green Party (also pro-independence) suffering an even greater slump despite a successful Holyrood poll in 2016.



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It is dangerous to equate votes for the two secessionist parties with support for independence. The SNP and Greens' strong positions on social justice mean they have plenty to offer left-leaning unionists, while Labour is likely to have enhanced its appeal to some nationalists under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership.

Nonetheless, the SNP leadership was quick to acknowledge that the loss of votes may at least in part reflect a [lack of appetite](#) for a second independence referendum, a prospect the party was perhaps too hasty to put back on the table following the UK's vote to leave the European Union. The First Minister's announcement that referendum plans are [on ice](#) for the time being was therefore as sensible as it was inevitable.

Opposition to reopening the independence question is likely to have been one driver of the strong showing by the impeccably unionist Conservatives. At the same time, many academics have long argued that the extent to which Scotland is a social democratic society is [overstated](#) – the potential for a Conservative revival was arguably always there.

This does not, of course, mean the end of the secessionist project. It does confirm that Nicola Sturgeon's uncharacteristically rash move towards a [second referendum](#) was not the way to bring about independence. The SNP would be better devoting its energies to the immediate task of government, in the process showing how a future independent Scotland might differ from the UK.

The Scottish Government's pledge to develop a devolved [social security](#) system based on respect for the dignity of claimants is a case in point. Recent UK governments' benefit cuts have been anything but respectful in their treatment of those who fall upon hard times as a result of unemployment, disability or caring responsibilities.

This pledge sits alongside a commitment to reinstate a legal duty to (almost) eliminate [child poverty](#) in Scotland. The abolition of the previous UK target by David Cameron's government was one of the clearer signs that the Conservatives have never fully shaken off the habits of the 'nasty party'.

But the project to do things better at devolved level is hampered by Holyrood's limited powers in this area. One in four Scottish children currently live in poverty, according to the [Child Poverty Action Group](#). Reducing this figure to one in 20, as the Child Poverty Bill currently before the Scottish Parliament proposes, will not be possible without increasing [child tax credits](#) and perhaps some other means tested benefits, most of which remain under Westminster control.

An opportunity now exists to change this. The Conservatives need to show their new allies in the Democratic Unionist Party that they are serious about holding the UK together. One way of doing so, and heading off a Labour recovery in Scotland, is by conceding what the Scottish electorate has consistently wanted – more devolution.

More social security devolution, specifically, needs to be a priority if the government is to put into practice its much-vaunted ambition to build a "[fairer Scotland](#)." There may be unintended consequences: the emergence of a more equal Scotland within the UK could lead some to conclude independence is unnecessary. Equally, if the government is seen to use additional devolved powers to build a more equal society, independence could appear more attractive.

With the election results indicating that secession must become a longer term aspiration, it is not unreasonable to suggest that such calculations should in any case be set aside for now. Despite the Conservative recovery, the combined SNP-Labour-Green vote indicates that social democracy retains its electoral dominance.

Within or outside the UK, putting this vision into practice should be the priority. This means that, for now, more devolution rather than independence is the more sensible constitutional demand.

About the Author



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