

Scotland and the myth of the 'Corbyn bounce'

*What explains the SNP's performance in the 2017 general election? Although recent focus has been on the 'Corbyn factor' theory, **Sean Swan** writes that many factors were at play. Too much focus on Corbyn is not going to be productive for the SNP.*

The SNP, or at least sections of it, have been dissecting the general election in Scotland in order to see what went 'wrong' for the party. In an article published on 12 June on [Wings Over Scotland](#), an "SNP activist" stated that the number one reason the party failed to do better was because its 'strategy of getting pro-indy Labour votes was completely sunk by the Corbyn bounce'. This view was also expressed in an article in [The National](#) on 9 of June. Several senior SNP members, echoing the Wings writer, mentioned a 'Corbyn factor' or a 'Corbyn bounce' as a contributing factor in the SNP's failure to do better.

The views of experienced canvassers, activists, and candidates who have taken part in an election campaign always provide invaluable insights; however, the very closeness to the action can lead to a loss of broader perspective, an inability to see the wood for the trees. This may have occurred in relation to the 'Corbyn bounce'.

The first point that may have been lost is the *exceptionality* of the 2015 general election. It was exceptional in the number of seats won by the SNP – 56 out of 59 – and in the number of seats lost by Labour – 40 out of 41.



2015 was the product of the political mobilisation of defeated indyref Yes supporters behind the SNP. Six months after the referendum, SNP membership had hit the 100,000 mark, making the SNP the third largest party by membership in the UK. Such levels of enthusiasm are hard to maintain. The 2015 general election represented an exceptional high point for the SNP, and an exceptional low point for Labour. Some sort of correction was inevitable.

There was a 'Corbyn bounce' in England: Labour's share of the vote there was 41.9%, up by 10.3% on 2015, but there was no significant 'Corbyn bounce' in Scotland. What happened in Scotland was that Labour increased their share of the vote by only 2.8% from 24.3% in 2015 to 27.1% in 2017. In absolute numbers, the Labour vote only increased by 10,000. In terms of party ranking, Labour actually dropped from second position in 2015 to third behind the Tories in 2017. Even a dead cat will bounce if you drop it from high enough, and what we witnessed in the general election was a Labour dead cat bounce, rather than a 'Corbyn bounce'.

This lack of a 'Corbyn bounce' in Scotland may well be due to the nature of Scottish Labour, which remains quite Blairite, but that is a different argument. The extra seats Labour took in the recent election had much more to do with a drop in the SNP vote than with a surge in the Labour vote – which in none of these newly-won seats reached the levels it had been in 2010.

Belief in the 'Corbyn bounce' legend may cause problems for the SNP if it gives rise to a misconceived and divisive debate over whether or not the party should move further to the left. There have already been signs of this, see this [article](#) in the *Sunday Herald*, and Michael Fry's [response](#) to it in *The National*.

Another danger of an overemphasis on the 'Corbyn bounce' is that it misses the point that while the SNP lost six seats to Labour, it lost twice as many to the Tories. One SNP candidate stated in *The National* that there had been too much "centralisation" and that the campaign had had a "one-size-fits-all" nature which, it was argued, had hurt the SNP in the north east.

"Scotland is not one place," one candidate said. "Scotland is not Glasgow, nor the central belt. It's many different places, with many different demographics and political realities."

In the north east and the south of Scotland the SNP lost seats to the Tories, not to Labour. An obsession with the 'Corbyn bounce' smacks of a central belt obsession (which is where Labour won its seats).

The Tories focused their campaign on stopping Indyref2. It was always likely, as I have [previously argued](#), that 'the centrality of the independence question and the rise of the SNP' would 'lead to the 'unionist' vote coalescing around one party (which would probably be the Conservatives)'. Labour has revived slightly from its 2015 calamity, and the Lib Dems did better than in 2015 – but on a reduced vote. The Conservative and Unionist Party, on the other hand, virtually doubled their share of the vote and took 13 seats. They are the ones likely to present a longer term challenge to the SNP. The Tories are the natural home of the pro-union vote, just as the SNP are the natural home of the independence vote. They are also the natural home of the pro-Brexit vote.

One potential error in the SNP's strategy was linking independence to an anti-Brexit position. This was a rather heroic stance, given that 36% of SNP voters had [voted Leave](#) in the Brexit referendum. Turnout was down from 71.1% in 2015 to 66.4% in 2017, and it may well have been pro-Leave SNP voters who stayed at home, turned off by the SNP's pro-Remain stance. It may not be coincidental that Angus Robertson's and Alex Salmond's north east constituencies had some of the highest Leave votes in Scotland. Less emphasis on Brexit might have saved their seats.

Being pro-independence and being pro-EU are not interchangeable positions. The SNP could square this circle by simply insisting that questions as to the international relations of a future independent Scotland are premature prior to independence. The Brexit situation could still be used to justify a second independence referendum, *not* on the particular issue of EU membership, but on the way in which Scotland's voice was ignored by the British government on such a fundamental issue.

Some sort of correction on the 2015 results was inevitable. It was also likely that the enthusiasm and membership surge post the indyref on which the 2015 election result was based was likely to subside. One senior SNP figure [told *The National*](#) that “We didn’t get our members out.... The new members in particular didn’t get involved and that hurt us.” Perhaps some new members failed to appreciate that politics is a long hard slog which only rarely results in rapid and radical change. These and many other factors were at play in the general election, but the ‘Corbyn bounce’ was more mirage than reality and too much focus on it is unlikely to be productive for the SNP.

About the Author

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