

# Once more unto the breach: what you need to know about the next Scottish Labour leader



*Although political contests in general, and Labour contests in particular, are bound to be divisive, the impending Scottish Labour leadership one has so far seen little acrimony. [Eric Shaw](#) provides an overview of the two candidates and concludes that neither of them is by nature confrontational, while both recognise that in order to regain Labour's leading role in Scotland, a huge amount of work has to be done.*

Kezia Dugdale's surprise resignation as leader of the Scottish Labour party has created a vacancy that already, in less than two decades, eight people have occupied. There are two contenders, Anas Sarwar and Richard Leonard.

The rise of 34 years of age, privately-educated Glasgow MSP Anas Sarwar, a dentist by profession, has been swift though not entirely smooth. He won the Westminster Glasgow Central seat generously vacated by his father Mohammad in 2010 but lost it in the 2015 wipe-out. He was elected to the Scottish Parliament two years later and is at present Health frontbencher. He is on the party's right and has in the past been critical of the Corbyn leadership. In his recently published diary, the left-wing MSP Neil Findlay [described](#) him as 'well-mannered, ambitious and extremely well connected.' He was an obvious contender for the leadership

Richard Leonard, the 55-year-old son of textile workers, was born in Yorkshire and, like Sarwar, was privately-educated (on a scholarship). He was employed as an economist for the Scottish TUC and then served for 20 years as a GMB official before being elected to the Scottish Parliament in 2015. He is the party's spokesman on the economy. Whilst unfamiliar to most Scots he is a longstanding and seasoned figure in Scottish Labour politics and a member of its Executive Committee for 20 years. He chaired the stormy and tumultuous Scottish party conference in spring 2003 (it coincided with the Iraq war) with very considerable aplomb. As the GMB's Political Officer he has been closely involved in Labour policy-making for years. To this extent (and unlike Jeremy Corbyn) he is no outsider.

A steadfast left-winger, Leonard warmly praised Corbyn for his 'authentic and principled politics' and criticised those who sought to undermine his leadership. Shrewd and adept, he is highly regarded by GMB officials who worked with him over the years and is viewed as a skilled negotiator and an astute operator. A conciliator by nature as leader he is likely to opt for an inclusive and consensual managerial style.

Sarwar has been somewhat slow in communicating his view of Labour's future. Leonard's position has been more clear-cut and signals something of a break with previous leaders. For him, Labour's chief priority should be challenging existing stark inequalities in the distribution of wealth, power, and life-chance rather than pondering the intricacies of Scotland's constitutional future. Shared class interests and aspirations between the mass of the British population, he contends, transcend any narrow differences over nationality. A prime strategic object for the party should be to expose the hollowness of much of the SNP's radical rhetoric, and Leonard has been [adamant](#) that under his leadership there would be no pacts or deals with the SNP, no second independence referendum, and 'no ground ceded to nationalism at the expense of progressive socialism'.

One matter, sadly, cannot be completely dismissed. Though he has lived in Scotland for all his adult life and [affirms](#) that 'I belong to Scotland', some more narrow-minded voters might query whether an Englishman should be a Scottish First Minister. It's not an issue for Labour's selectorate but it might be for the wider electorate.

Initially Sarwar appeared to hold the upper hand. He was well-known in the party, an accomplished TV performer, polished, tactful, and affable. It had been widely assumed that Sarwar has been planning a leadership bid for a while and he would have a slick and professional operation in place. But apparently not, for his campaign soon stumbled over damaging revelations about the family firm, United Wholesale Scotland, in which he owns a large stake. It transpired that, not only was there no recognised trade union but the firm was paying almost £1 less than the living wage for some of its workforce: highly embarrassing facts for a senior Labour politician. Sarwar's own supporters were baffled why this had not been anticipated and, although Sarwar soon agreed to dispose of his stake, the story was [widely publicised](#) and the damage was inflicted.

Another factor that, at first glance, seemed to favour Sarwar was the the balance of opinion within the membership. A significantly lower proportion had backed Corbyn in the most recent leadership election and there were [far fewer new recruits](#) than south of the border.

But much depends on the actual selectorate. In Corbyn's second election there was a huge controversy over the NEC's decision that no one could vote unless they had been a member for six months, excluding a large swathe of largely Corbynista recruits. The SEC, in contrast, has stipulated that anyone who joined as member, affiliated supporter (i.e. signed-up political levy payer in an affiliated trade union) or registered supporters by 9 October would be eligible to vote. In other words, candidates were given a month to recruit fresh members.

This played to Leonard's strengths as he knew he could rely on both the left-wing Campaign for Socialism, closely linked to the Momentum organisation, and the bulk of the affiliated unions to work energetically to recruit sympathetic new members. The [Huffington Post](#) recently reported that Unite, the UK's biggest union, has already signed up 2,700 affiliated supporters to add to the 5,000 it already has. This forms a large proportion of the estimated over 20,000 members and registered supporters plus a roughly-estimated 10,000 affiliated members who compose Scottish Labour's selectorate.

Although any contest for the leadership is bound, to some degree, to be divisive so far there has been little of the acrimony or invective which has recently typified Labour politics. Neither candidate is by nature confrontational and whoever is elected – most probably Leonard – will try hard to mend wounds understanding that if the party is to regain its leading role in Scottish politics a huge amount of work has to be done.

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## About the Author



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