

# Will Richard Leonard's election mark a definitive turning point for Scottish Labour?

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*Following the election of a new Scottish Labour leader, [Sean Swan](#) explains why the position was created in the first place in 2011, its course so far, and what the party may aspire to achieve under Richard Leonard.*

An unedifying contest for the leadership of Scottish Labour concluded on Saturday 18 November. The contest was between Richard Leonard, who only became an MSP in 2016, and Anas Sarwar, an anti-Corbynite who had briefly been interim leader of Scottish Labour in 2014, having been deputy leader from 2011-14. Leonard [won](#) by 12,469 votes to Sarwar's 9,516.

The position of leader of Scottish Labour is relatively new. It was created in 2011 in the wake of Labour's poor performance in that year's Holyrood elections when the SNP had done what the electoral system had been designed to prevent them doing – won an outright majority. Scottish Labour's response was to undertake a constitutional shake up giving the party more independence from London.

Johann Lamont was elected to the newly created leadership position in December 2011, just prior to the shakeup of Scottish politics that the Indyref campaign was about to cause. Her leadership did not help the party. Lamont seemed to be trying to attack the SNP from the right. This may have been merely a tactic, but whatever Lamont's true position, she gave an apparently [pro-austerity](#) policy speech on 25 September 2012. The speech was later [described](#) by Richard Seymour in *The Guardian* as 'atrocious, reactionary', 'Blairite', driven by hostility to the SNP, and 'a gift to the Tories'. Seymour's observation that Lamont's policies served only to remind 'ex-Labour voters why they defected to the SNP', would prove prophetic.

Lamont and Scottish Labour joined the Tories and Lib Dems in campaigning for a 'No' vote in the Indyref, but many traditional Labour strongholds voted 'Yes' – including Lamont's own Glasgow Pollock constituency. At Labour's annual conference two weeks after the Indyref, [rumours](#) were circulating of a plot to replace Lamont with Jim Murphy, then Shadow Secretary of State for Defence. Lamont would eventually [resign](#) via an interview with *The Daily Record* on 24 October 2014. In her resignation interview she [accused](#) British Labour of treating Scottish Labour as a 'branch office of a party based in London', and of failing to understand Scottish politics.

After Lamont's resignation, Anas Sarwar became interim leader prior to the election of Jim Murphy. Lamont did not vote for Murphy, the latter having been considered London's man and a product of 'New' Labour. He had supported the invasion of Iraq and been a minister in both the Blair and Brown governments, and was also on the [advisory council](#) of the neoconservative Henry Jackson Society. It would be hard to think of a less suitable leader of Scottish Labour in the post-Indyref political climate. Under Murphy, Scottish Labour lost 40 of its 41 Westminster seats – including Murphy's own – to the SNP.

A week after this electoral fiasco, Murphy narrowly survived a no confidence vote at a meeting of the party's Scottish executive committee. The vote was controversial. Murphy himself voted – '[a manoeuvre that raised eyebrows](#)' – and the eligibility of another SEC member who had supported Murphy was disputed. Murphy eventually announced he would stand down the following month, and was succeeded by his deputy, Kezia Dugdale. This ushered in an era in which Scotland's three main parties were led by women. Dugdale, like her Conservative opposite number, Ruth Davidson, was also the first [openly gay](#) leader of her party.

Dugdale's leadership produced mixed results. Scottish Labour's vote dropped by 9% in the 2016 Holyrood election, reducing the party that had once dominated Holyrood to third place behind the SNP and Conservatives. In the 2017 Westminster election, Labour [increased](#) its 2015 vote by 38% across Great Britain; but in Scotland, Scottish Labour's vote was only up 1%, and it ended up in third place in number of seats won. Labour's unexpectedly good performance in England and Wales was attributed to its leader, Jeremy Corbyn. Dugdale had [opposed](#) Corbyn during the 2016 leadership contest, backing his rival, Owen Smith.

Corbyn undertook a five-day long [tour](#) of Scottish marginals at the end of August. Whether connected or not, Kezia Dugdale abruptly [quit](#) as leader shortly afterwards.

The leadership contest between Anas Sarwar and Richard Leonard that followed revealed a deeply divided party. Sarwar is a product of 'New' Labour and has opposed Corbyn. He and James Kelly had [instigated](#) a letter 'which attempted to strong-arm MSPs into opposing Jeremy Corbyn's' re-election as Labour leader. Sarwar's campaign was scandal-hit from the start. It emerged that the Sarwar family business, in which Anas has a quarter share, did not [recognise](#) unions, and did not [pay](#) the 'living wage'. Then the secretary of Sarwar's own Labour party branch, John Cork, resigned in protest over [irregularities](#) involving newly joined members who 'had the same mobile number but different addresses'. But the real weakness of Sarwar lay in the fact that, as Kevin Makenna put it:

*A feeling persists though that he is part of a delusional cadre of senior and influential figures within the party who seem to reserve their deepest political loathing for the SNP rather than the Tories. In this they are utterly detached from the instincts of its rank and file.*

Leonard, on the other hand, is a trade unionist and was backed by the unions, [including](#) Len McCluskey's Unite – the largest union in the UK.

Paul Hutcheon's inquest into the leadership contest in *The Herald* [concluded](#) that Sarwar had been a 'woeful candidate'. But it is difficult to know if Leonard's election marks a definitive turning point for Scottish Labour. The party's interim leader, Alex Rowley, was forced to step down on 15 November over claims of his having sent [abusive](#) text messages. On the eve of the leadership vote the out-going leader, Kezia Dugdale did a "Nadine Dorries" and, despite still being an MSP, [decamped](#) to Australia to take part in the reality TV show *I'm a celebrity...get me out of here*.

But the basic problem Scottish Labour faces is that for Holyrood the party to beat is the SNP; for Westminster it's the Tories. If Scottish Labour persists in attacking SNP anti-austerity measures in Holyrood, they cannot expect to have much credibility when they then assume an anti-austerity position themselves when contesting UK general elections as part of UK Labour. There is also the question of Scottish Labour's 'unionism'. It is possible to make a progressive argument in favour of the UK state, but if Scottish Labour's pro-Union argument is not based on progressive policies on jobs, housing, the NHS and the welfare state, it becomes hard to distinguish it from Tory and British nationalist Union-Jackery. And the voters tend to notice.

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## About the Author

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