

Independence in the Age of Disruption: questions for Scotland's main parties



In light of the party conference season, [Gerry Hassan](#) provides an overview of the issues the SNP, Labour, and the Conservatives must urgently deal with in Scotland. He argues that with the challenges and ruptures that lie ahead, Scotland will need a very different kind of politics.

Scottish politics is in a strange place at the moment – not one of calm, but of transition with the future uncertain. After several years of high-octane politics, and the twin peaks of disruption of the 2014 independence referendum and 2016 Brexit vote, Scotland's main political parties have some adjusting to do.

The SNP, ten years in office, are still trying to digest the reverse of the 2017 UK election; the Scottish Conservatives are trying to figure out how to continue their newfound popularity; and Labour are about to choose their ninth leader in the devolution era. The Liberal Democrats, despite once being crucial coalition partners with Labour in Scotland, and the Scottish Greens, whose vital pro-independence votes in the Scottish Parliament the SNP need for a majority, both struggle to make an impact.

The SNP meet at their autumn conference in Glasgow in unsettled mood. They are more unsure of themselves than a year ago and less confident that the forces behind them will lead to independence. Ten years into office, the party first went up in popularity – its narrow win in 2007 was followed by a landslide in the 2011 devolved elections, then by the tsunami of the SNP 56 in 2015. It has been slowly down since, while still remaining by far Scotland's leading party, and government.

The party's culture over that decade has morphed into one of increasing centralisation in how it does politics, how it governs and sees Scotland – a party that at its top represents the insider class of the devolution era; a role it has taken from Labour. There is still an element of self-imposed discipline in the Nationalists, but underneath disquiet is growing.

There is no clear strategy to independence or a second referendum (which is unlikely until after Brexit and the 2021 Holyrood elections), while the pressures and problems of being in office mount by the day. Whereas once competence and managerialism seemed enough, now the constraints and compromises have become obvious as the party has to defend the domestic status quo on public services, while trying to pass the buck for any problems onto Westminster and the Tories.

Central to the SNP – as is to all the main parties – is leadership. Alex Salmond's populist leadership gave the party an edge, while turning off as many voters as it attracted. Nicola Sturgeon, after a honeymoon period, has also proven divisive without the edge and populism. From a place of strength after the 2014 referendum, the SNP seem to have shown little leadership or strategic nous. Instead, Sturgeon's party at one point became so popular they seemed paralysed from doing anything noticeable or bold, for want of losing part of their huge national coalition. Instead, SNP has wilted through inaction and an anxiousness not to alienate anyone who was in their 'Big Tent'.

Hence peak-SNP saw no appraisal of the 2014 independence offer, no telling of home truths, and no new independence package put together. The recent, more radical Programme for Government announced by Sturgeon showed a distinct move to the left, but what matters is how the leadership present and make the case for such a politics. After years of seeming impregnable, there are now questions about whether people are listening that closely to the leadership and whether they are tuned into the concerns of the country.

Revealingly, just as Labour conference never debated Brexit, so SNP conference isn't debating independence: the conference agenda is a reflection of leadership caution and control. There is a missing debate in the formal channels of the SNP on the content, processes, and timing of any independence referendum and the strategy to win it. Such blatant party management can only contain pressures in the short term, so what will it take to overturn this tired way of doing things?

The politician of the hour is, in terms of media buzz and excitement, the Scottish Tory leader Ruth Davidson. She has brought the Tories in from the cold in Scotland and fought two insurrectionist campaigns in the 2016 Scottish Parliament and 2017 Westminster elections, which have re-established them as the second party in votes and seats. Yet, shorn of 'No means No' to a second independence vote, the party are bereft of ideas and memorable policies. Davidson has given her party a second chance, but has to seize it and use it to sell Tory policies and values.

Scottish Labour staged a mini-revival in the 2017 June election coming back from one seat to win seven. This was treated as a small miracle after years of decline, but the party only seems to know one way of doing politics – internecine infighting. Thus, the latest leadership contest following Kezia Dugdale's resignation between the MSPs Richard Leonard and Anas Sarwar has seen copious amounts of personal accusations between the two and their camps. This has disguised that, for all the individual differences between the two, the ideological ones are not that pronounced.

Leonard is for now the favourite due to placing himself as the candidate closer to Corbyn, aided by several mishaps by Sarwar. But the bigger problems are the bitterness in sections of Labour at its shrunken, hollowed out state and an absence of an agreement on what to stand for in the face of the SNP's cautious centre-leftism. Neither candidate or the contest so far shows any sign of addressing this.

Where does this take Scottish politics? The big questions have not gone away: the issue of independence and the challenge of Brexit, the pressures on a small polity with a compromised autonomy whatever the constitutional status of the nation. Critically, given Scotland's oft proclaimed social democratic credentials, how is this given substance and form in a country entering the second decade of SNP rule and 20 years of devolution?

One answer to this until now has been a *vive la* celebration of Scottish difference which has eulogised the traditions of egalitarianism and social justice. But that doesn't chime very much with the realities of the country for many of its citizens – in education, health, law and order and other public services.

The SNP and Labour's take on centre-left politics has been deeply pragmatic and lacking specifics or intellectual underpinnings, at least so far. The age of disruption means that such an approach is spectacularly ill-fitted for the many challenges ahead. While the temptation of Scotland's political leaders will be to continue with the centrist managerialism of recent times, the challenges and ruptures coming are going to necessitate a very different politics: one more adult, honest, bold, and admitting the hard choices ahead, whether independent or not.

About the Author



Gerry Hassan is a writer, commentator and researcher, and author and editor of over two dozen books on Scottish and British politics, including *Independence of the Scottish Mind: Elite Narratives, Public Spaces and the Making of a Modern Nation* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014) *A Nation Changed? The SNP and Scotland Ten Years On* (Luath Press 2017).

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