

Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale quits

Steve James
25 September 2017

Kezia Dugdale, the eighth leader in 18 years of the Labour Party in Scotland, resigned last month after two years in the job.

Dugdale, a right-wing careerist devoid of principles or any record of struggle in the working class, was from the first at odds with Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the British party. Her career points to the hollowed-out character of Labour and underscores how Corbyn's refusal to wage a struggle against the right-wing has played the central role in maintaining its dominance of the party.

At times, it seemed Dugdale was more loyal to Scottish First Minister and Scottish National Party (SNP) leader Nicola Sturgeon. But no campaign was mobilised against her, and her departure was not even anticipated. Rather, she simply walked away from a post that had become politically tiresome and personally awkward.

Dugdale joined the Labour Party as an unemployed law graduate at a loose end, having had an interest in student welfare on the student union. She considered politically-minded students as "geeks." She was selected as a member of the Scottish parliament (MSP) in 2011 via the list system and quickly appointed as shadow minister for youth employment. By 2014, still a complete unknown, she was elected deputy leader to arch right-winger and Blairite Jim Murphy.

Murphy led the Labour Party's campaign for a "No" vote in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, which was waged on an entirely right-wing, pro-imperialist basis, arm-in-arm with the hated Conservative government, rather than opposing efforts to divide Scottish and English workers. Despite voters rejecting independence by a 55 to 45 percent majority, the Labour Party went on to suffer the most catastrophic electoral collapse in its history, with the party viewed, on the basis of its long record in local as well as national government, as indistinguishable from

the Tories. Labour, for decades the dominant party in Scotland, lost all but one of its 41 Westminster seats in the 2015 general election to the SNP.

Murphy immediately resigned to be replaced by Dugdale, who won 72 percent of the vote among Labour members against fellow right-wing nonentity Ken Mackintosh. Dugdale's main credentials for office appeared to be that she was right-wing and female. Shortly after her election in Scotland, however, Corbyn won the leadership of the British Labour Party which, in a highly distorted way, reflected political shifts to the left among broad sections of workers.

Dugdale opposed Corbyn from the first and voted for the Blairite candidate, Yvette Cooper. She supported successive efforts to unseat Corbyn by the right-wing, and in June 2016 called on him to resign. Two months later, she voted for Owen Smith, who challenged Corbyn for Labour leadership. When Corbyn again won, Dugdale immediately stated Corbyn's chances of winning an election were "slim to nonexistent." Twenty-four hours later, realising which way the wind was blowing and confirming her lack of political convictions, she insisted the exact opposite, stating, "Of course Jeremy Corbyn can win a general election."

Dugdale, nevertheless, continued her efforts to undermine Corbyn. In September 2016, both the Scottish and Welsh Labour parties won autonomy within Labour to set their own policies and to have representation on the party's powerful National Executive Committee (NEC). The move deprived Corbyn of a majority on the NEC. Dugdale trumpeted her success and promised to be a "loud and passionate voice for Scotland's interests"—that is, for the right-wing Labour apparatus and its business backers in Scotland.

The NEC dispute also highlighted tensions between Dugdale and Corbyn on the constitutional question. Since being elected, Dugdale had attempted to

triangulate Labour into a position where it was less vulnerable to the Scottish nationalist claims that Labour in Scotland was merely a branch of Labour in London. In the party's election manifesto, 20 years after Labour's original devolution legislation, Labour offered, with Dugdale's backing, "the option of a more federalised country—dangling the possibility of a further extension of powers to the regional elite, while avoiding a breakup of the UK.

Dugdale also consistently gave the impression of being closer to the SNP than sections of her own party. As deputy Labour leader, she had already professed herself a "fan" of Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon. In the immediate aftermath of the 2016 Brexit vote, Dugdale went as far as to confess that it was "not inconceivable" that she might back another Scottish independence vote if it helped keep Scotland in the European Union.

By early 2017, it emerged that Dugdale, whose father is an SNP supporter, was actually dating an SNP MSP, Jenny Gilruth, Parliamentary Liaison Officer for SNP deputy leader, John Swinney. Extraordinarily, the two appear to have met on a tour organised by the US State Department—which notoriously holds such recruiting events for prospective CIA assets.

Labour, in the event, did better than expected in this year's snap June 8 election, winning 30 seats, including six recovered in Scotland. Corbyn embarked over the summer on a tour of 64 key marginal seats which Labour needs to win to form a government without support from one of the minority parties. Eighteen of these are in Scotland and all are currently held by the SNP.

Had Corbyn had the slightest interest in a struggle against the right-wing in his own party, this tour, through Labour's lost industrial heartlands in Scotland, would have been the time and place to do it. He could have denounced Dugdale's campaign against him and exposed Labour's fostering of the political climate in which the SNP could emerge. He could then have denounced the SNP in power for its implementation of Tory policies and revived the accurate term "Tartan Tories"—once coined by Labour to describe the nationalists.

Instead, although matters do indeed appear to have come to a head during Corbyn's tour, it was over what tactics best served business interests. Dugdale spoke on

BBC radio late August of her view that Corbyn was "very open" to her repeated calls for Scotland, in the context of Brexit, to develop distinct employment policies in line with the needs of Scottish-based employers. Corbyn rejected this, but from a rival view of what was best for business: "I think that becomes very complicated because if you are trading, companies exist in Scotland, exist in Wales, exist in England, they are making things, doing things together, it would be very, very difficult if not impossible to see how we could separate those out. It has to be a UK-wide agreement."

Dugdale resigned days later.

Only two candidates have come forward to replace her. Anas Sarwar, reportedly the favourite, is a right-wing multi-millionaire MSP and a shareholder in his family's low-wage cash-and-carry empire.

Sarwar's opponent is Richard Leonard, the preferred candidate of Corbyn supporters in Scotland around the Campaign for Socialism group. Leonard, formerly an organiser for the GMB trade union, has also been supported by Simon Fletcher, who organised Corbyn's 2015 leadership campaign based on recruiting a layer of new party members. He is supported by the pseudo left. The Socialist Party Scotland, for example, hailed Leonard's candidacy, claiming that Labour can be a "party that fights for the interests of the working class"... if only it changes its position to support Scottish independence.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact