

Scottish National Party's fourth election win threatens UK breakup

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Nicola Sturgeon's Scottish National Party (SNP) won this year's elections to the Scottish parliament by a huge margin. The party polled 47.7 percent of the vote in individual constituencies, against the Conservatives with 21.9 percent and Labour with 21.6 percent. In the regional lists, the SNP won 40.3 percent against 23.5 percent for the Conservatives and 17.9 percent for Labour. The Greens polled only 1.3 percent in the constituencies but 8.1 percent on the lists.

Under the proportional representation system, these figures translate to 64 seats for the SNP, 31 for the Conservatives, 22 for Labour, eight for the Greens and four for the Liberal Democrats. With the formal or informal assistance of the Greens, the SNP will therefore be able to form a pro-independence majority in the 129-seat parliament.

Sturgeon immediately announced her intention to introduce a bill for a second referendum on Scottish independence. Asked by the BBC's Andrew Marr if another vote could be held as soon as next spring, Sturgeon replied that it would be consistent with a "timescale of within the first half of the parliamentary term." Scottish parliamentary sessions last four years.

Sturgeon sought to head off arguments over the legality of a future referendum ending up in the UK Supreme Court. She told Marr, "The UK government knows that if we ever get into a situation where this is being determined in the courts then actually what the UK government is arguing is that there is no democratic route for Scotland to have independence."

In response, Conservative UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who has repeatedly said he will not authorise another referendum, invited Sturgeon, Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford (Labour) and whoever emerges to replace Arlene Foster as leader of the Democratic Unionist Party and first minister in

Northern Ireland to a "Team UK" summit. The meeting will "chart a way out of the acute phase of the pandemic" and "discuss our shared challenges and how we can work together in the coming months and years to overcome them." But numerous commentators have suggested that, in the face of a pro-independence Holyrood, Johnson's blanket opposition to a new poll cannot be sustained.

The SNP victory is by no means clearly indicative of an electoral majority for independence. Repeated opinion polls, and this is consistent with the SNP's share of the vote, oscillate somewhere around, or just under, 50 percent. In 2014, independence was rejected by 55 percent to 45 percent. Even today, if the "don't knows" are included, nowhere near half the population supports separatism.

But the result nevertheless points to a sharp polarisation on the constitutional question.

Despite the catastrophic global pandemic, deep social tensions, a global outburst of militarism and extraordinary financial instability, the election was dominated by whether tiny Scotland should be "independent". As a result, both nationalist and unionist camps benefited from tactical voting.

George Galloway's British nationalist "Alliance for Unity" project, urging tactical anti-SNP voting and rival parties standing down where necessary, polled very poorly. But the tactic of supporting the best placed pro-union candidate, Labour or Conservative, gained traction in denying some target seats to the SNP.

Former First Minister Alex Salmond called for a constituency vote for the SNP and a regional vote for his recently formed Alba Party, claiming this as a route to a "supermajority" in support of secession while asserting his role as a power-broker in and around the SNP.

Salmond's new party pitched itself as the most hardline advocate of independence. Alba's first electoral promotions were reminiscent of the ludicrous Mel Gibson film *Braveheart*, while its actual manifesto was indistinguishable from the SNP save for its call for independence negotiations to commence the moment a "supermajority" government took power.

This effort to establish a role as the most aggressive saltire-waving ginger group for the SNP failed to win a single seat. Instead, the Greens, who work closely with the SNP, benefitted from tactical pro-independence voting.

These results point to the fact that support for the SNP still depends to a large degree on its self-portrayal as a left alternative to both the Tories and the Labour Party. Despite being in power since 2007 and having supervised nearly a decade and a half of austerity measures, the SNP still benefits from the rightward lurch of Johnson's Tory government in Westminster and of its shadow, the Labour Party, under Sir Keir Starmer.

The new Labour leader in Scotland, Anas Sarwar, was unable to halt the party's ongoing collapse—leaving Sturgeon free to propose independence as a route towards a more just and egalitarian society.

Sturgeon has fronted the Scottish government's response to COVID-19. Despite following near identical policies to Johnson, she benefitted throughout from the anger generated by the Tories' open espousal of "herd immunity", even as she too prepares a full reopening of the economy.

The SNP can also still rely on a somewhat higher level of public spending in Scotland, in comparison with the rest of the UK. The manifesto proposed, for example, a national social care service, marginally increased health service spending, and a slightly larger pay rise for health workers.

In power, the new SNP administration will quickly drop such promises and demand further austerity. Devastating cuts are already being imposed across local government. SNP-run Glasgow City Council is currently rolling out plans to close local libraries, sports facilities and community centres across the city's most impoverished areas. The SNP's default response is to deflect criticism of its policies by claiming that the solution to all social questions lies in more power for the Scottish parliament in Holyrood, Edinburgh.

The SNP is aided crucially by pseudo-left groups who, simultaneously with the Labour Party's rightward shift, have assisted the SNP in giving the anti-working class, pro-NATO, pro-European Union Scottish independence project a false "left" veneer.

During the 2021 election the pseudo-left groups such as the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) offered their support to the SNP, Alba, and the Greens, calling for votes for the pro-independence parties. Former SSP leader Tommy Sheridan even dumped the remnants of his own vanity project, Solidarity, to join Salmond's Alba.

The Socialist Party Scotland (SPS) stood its own pro-independence candidates under the Scottish Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (STUSC), calling for "indyref2 and an independent socialist Scotland". An SPS election commentary, however, offered advice to Alba to "develop a bigger electoral base in the future by basing themselves on an increasing layer of the independence movement who are critical of the SNP leadership."

Socialist Worker quoted long standing member Keir McKechnie, stating, "We need to force Westminster to cave in and exert maximum pressure on the SNP and the Greens to set the date for indyref2 now, not later."

The jumble of parties, think tanks, campaign and pressure groups that constitute the Scottish pseudo-left represent a grasping petty-bourgeois layer, seeking positions in the apparatus of an emergent Scottish capitalist state, within the trade unions, and in various cultural institutions and NGOs oriented to any future state apparatus or occupied presently in demanding more funding for Scotland from Westminster.

Workers and young people in Scotland seeking a perspective to oppose all forms of nationalism, social inequality and a genuine road to unite, not divide, the working class in the struggle for socialism in Britain, Europe and internationally, should contact the Socialist Equality Party today.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)