Humza Yousaf replaces Nicola Sturgeon as Scottish National Party leader

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2 April 2023

Humza Yousaf has been elected leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) following a bitter campaign to select a replacement for Nicola Sturgeon, who unexpectedly resigned earlier this year. Yousaf has also become Scottish First Minister after the SNP's Green Party coalition partners backed him.

Yousaf won 48 percent of first preference votes against 40 percent for rival Kate Forbes and 11 percent for Ash Regan. After Regan was eliminated, Yousaf beat Forbes narrowly, by 52 to 48 percent. Of the SNP's 72,169 members, only 70 percent, (50,490) voted.

Yousaf's candidacy was endorsed by Sturgeon ally, and former Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, and both the current and former leaders of the SNP in Westminster, Stephen Flynn and Ian Blackford. He will continue Sturgeon's pro-business policies, camouflaged with a veneer of progressive rhetoric, lashings of identity politics, and close relations with the trade union bureaucracy. He indicated he would not continue with Sturgeon's plan that the next UK general election should be a “de facto” poll on Scottish independence, something which had alienated SNP parliamentarians under conditions in which support for independence remains a minority position among the population. One of his first decisions as first minister was to create an independence minister post as a sop to hardline nationalists within and outside of the party.

As a condition of coalition with the Scottish Greens, Yousaf intends to proceed with Sturgeon's gender self-identification bill, currently stalled by the UK government. The Bill, and the frenzy for and against it, played a part in Sturgeon’s departure. For Yousaf, it serves as a cynical distraction from the Scottish government's 2023-24 austerity budget which, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, will mean real terms fall of 1.6 percent to public services.

Cuts in Scotland are expected to be higher than in England and Wales as more areas of budgeting are devolved to Holyrood. This is because the Barnett formula, established in the 1970s to provide for a higher level of public spending in Scotland to offset geographical and social problems, applies to ever fewer areas of spending.

Born in Glasgow in 1985, Yousaf, a practicing Muslim with Pakistani and Punjabi Kenyan parents, is one of several British politicians with immigrant backgrounds who have risen to prominence. The current UK Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, far right Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, her equally frothing predecessor Priti Patel along with Labour Party Mayor of London Sajid Khan and Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar were all born to parents who emigrated to Britain from South Asia.

The elevation of such individuals is utilised by the media and political establishment as supposedly progressive camouflage for politics that proceeds ever further to the right at the expense of the working class.

Yousaf joined the SNP in 2005 based on its then opposition to the war in Iraq, in line with the party's orientation to the European Union. By 2008, having been identified as a rising figure to be cultivated, he took part in the US State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program. Former alumni include Conservative Prime Ministers Edward Heath and Margaret Thatcher, and Labour’s Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

He was elected to the Scottish parliament in 2011. A year later, the SNP dropped its long-standing opposition to NATO while Yousaf was given a junior ministerial post. He has been a cabinet minister ever since.

He became Minister of Health and Social Care in 2021 following the resignation of Jeane Freeman after thousands of COVID deaths in Scottish care homes. In September that year, Yousaf encouraged the public to “think twice” before phoning an ambulance, a statement criticised for putting lives at risk. He then requested the

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Ministry of Defence to provide troops to drive ambulances. Some 500 people died in 2021 waiting for emergency treatment.

Yousaf has the backing of the trade unions. After restricting health workers in Scotland to an average 7.5 percent this year, followed by 6.5 percent next yearwell below inflation—Yousaf advised Westminster, “Don’t invite trade unions in and insult them by just having cups of tea and biscuits... listen to them around the pay demands that they have got, and they will meet you halfway, that has been my experience.”

Scottish Trades Union Congress leader, Roz Foyer, welcomed his election.

The winner's main opponent was Sturgeon's Finance Secretary, Kate Forbes. She is a Gaelic speaking evangelical Christian and member of the Free Church of Scotland which opposes same-sex marriage and abortion. Her manifesto was more nakedly pitched towards the small business owners who make up a significant component of the SNP, pledging to “make the Scottish economy more prosperous”, and promising to the huge Scottish food and drink industry to “reignite the fire that fuelled this industry's previous success”.

As Finance Minister, Forbes published a National Strategy for Economic Transformation calling for “a culture that encourages, promotes and celebrates entrepreneurial activity in every sector of our economy.”

Forbes denounced Yousaf during a TV debate, “When you were transport minister the trains were never on time. When you were justice minister, the police were strained to breaking point. And now as health minister, we've got record high waiting times. What makes you think you can do a better job as First Minister?”. This from the minister who held the purse strings while Yousaf carried out his attacks on the living standards of workers, including slashing public services.

Yousaf responded with a flimsy pitch to position himself to her left, stating, “If change means lurching to the right, Kate, if it means rolling back progressive values, I don't think that's an option.”

Taking office Yousaf offered Forbes the much less significant rural affairs post in his new cabinet. She refused, returning to the backbenches.

The third candidate, Ash Regan, won only 11 percent of first preference votes. She had resigned from government in opposition to Sturgeon's gender bill and presented herself as the most pro-independence candidate. The former campaign manager at pseudo-left think tank Common Weal has prominently promoted the oil and gas industry and sought closer relations with former SNP leader and First Minister Alex Salmond's Alba Party. Salmond has close connections to the banks and oil industry, previously working for the Royal Bank of Scotland, including as an oil economist from 1982-84.

Various scores were settled during the election campaign. The SNP's communications chief and former tabloid editor Murray Foot suddenly resigned. Foote, who had rejected claims that the SNP had lost over 30,000 members since December 2021 as “drivel”, was left exposed when the dramatic collapse in SNP support was acknowledged.

Foote’s resignation was followed by the man deemed responsible for the dubious figures, the party's chief executive for 20 years Peter Murrell. Murrell, husband to Nicola Sturgeon, is a central figure in allegations of financial irregularities swirling around the SNP. Another Sturgeon ally forced out was Liz Lloyd, her chief of staff.

All the leading players in the Sturgeon SNP leadership’s war against Salmond have now resigned. Salmond, seeking rehabilitation from the SNP, responded to Yousaf's election by publicly praising all the candidates and calling for an “Independence Convention” to bring all the pro-independence parties, the SNP, the Greens, Alba and the pseudo-left Scottish Socialist Party, together.

Continuity with Sturgeon’s agenda “won’t cut it”, he said, warning that “constitutional issue cannot be kicked into the long grass yet again.”

Salmond knows that an increasingly fractious and unpopular SNP, which has been leading attacks on workers' living standards and social services for over a decade and a half now, must face off an ongoing and powerful strike movement in Scotland and across the UK. He is urging the party to beat the nationalist drum as loud as possible in order to build a middle-class social base for its pro-capitalist, anti-worker agenda with promises of greater personal wealth, lower business taxes, governmental position and social privileges following independence.

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