

Labour benefits from Scottish National Party collapse in Rutherglen and Hamilton West

Steve James
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In a result having implications for the next UK general election, the Scottish National Party (SNP) has suffered a disastrous by-election defeat in the largely working class constituency of Rutherglen and Hamilton West, part of the conurbation around the city of Glasgow. The result has been hailed by Labour as proof that it is on course for a general election victory next year.

In a campaign in which social issues dominated, the Labour Party won the Westminster parliamentary seat with 58.6 percent of the vote, against the SNP's 27.6 percent, marking a 20.4 percent swing to Labour since 2019 and overturning a 5,230 SNP majority.

The dramatic outcome is being taken as an indicator of a sharp shift away from the SNP towards Labour which, if replicated across Scotland, would hand 42 seats to Labour and contribute significantly to putting Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer into 10 Downing Street. Labour, formerly by far the dominant party in Scotland, has, since 2015, been reduced to one, now two, Westminster seats. The SNP still holds 44, most all of them won from Labour in the last decade. Labour held over 40 seats in Scotland from 1964 to 2010, before being electorally obliterated. Scottish Labour leader, Anas Sarwar, has previously viewed 23 SNP seats as vulnerable.

Labour leader Starmer boasted, "When I left here a week ago with the team, I said you've got to win it. You blew the doors off!" Scottish voters had turned to the SNP because they "turned their back" on the Tory government, claiming that they had not turned to Labour before because "not so long ago" the "saw a Labour Party that drifted away from them".

Alluding to his replacement of former "left" leader Jeremy Corbyn, he boasted, "We've changed and because we've changed we are now the party of the

change here in Scotland, we're the party of change in Britain, the party of change right across the whole country."

Scottish Labour leader Sarwar commented, "I think what that demonstrates is that there's something happening in Scotland... that I think every political party has probably not quite seen the extent of. And that is people are sick to the back teeth of the failure, of the decline, of the chaos and the division, and they want change, and Scottish Labour is determined to be that change."

This is a bogus reading of the result. The SNP's rise in popularity was made possible primarily because they positioned themselves as the more left-wing opponents of the Tories and the rightward trajectory of Labour under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Corbyn's constant retreats before his Blairite opponents left him unable to significantly reverse this situation.

In addition, Labour was standing against a massively discredited SNP. Its vote was far more to do with this than any enthusiasm for Starmer. The by-election followed former SNP MP Margaret Ferrier's conviction for breaching COVID-19 regulations in the early stages of the pandemic. In September 2020, Ferrier suffering from COVID symptoms, travelled by train to London for a parliamentary debate. Ferrier then returned by train, having in the meantime tested positive. Suspended by the SNP, Ferrier was convicted of "culpable and reckless conduct" and sentenced to 270 hours community service. She was finally suspended from the House of Commons in May 2023 for 30 days, and a by-election triggered following a recall petition signed by over 11,000 of her constituents.

The SNP is now in the grip of a financial scandal and factional infighting that forced the sudden resignation of Nicola Sturgeon as first minister and her replacement

by Humza Yousaf. The party is the focus of a police investigation into its finances which resulted in a number of leading figures, including Sturgeon, being arrested. No one has been charged, but the scandal erupted amid recriminations within the party over tactics used to pursue Scottish independence, savage local government cuts emanating from the SNP government in Edinburgh and a collapse in party membership.

This left the SNP unable to mobilise its core support. But indicative of broad contempt for all the parties, turnout in Rutherglen and Hamilton West was only 37.2 percent compared with 66.5 percent at the last general election.

The SNP's candidate Katy Loudon polled a mere 8,399 votes compared with 23,775 for the SNP in 2019. But Labour's Michael Shanks garnered 17,845 this week compared with 18,545 in 2019. Labour also benefited from anti-Tory sentiment that saw the Conservative vote also collapse, to 1,192, down 11.1 percent to a mere 3.9 percent.

The SNP has been imposing year-on-year cuts in vital public services, forcing council after council into closing down services. Currently, local authorities of all political stripes across Scotland, in line with conditions across the UK, are facing huge shortfalls in funding. Scottish councils will be facing a funding gap of as much as £1.2 billion by 2025/6, while £302 million in cuts are in preparation for this year. SNP controlled Glasgow City Council is facing a £196 million shortfall before any annual pay round. SNP and Liberal Democrat controlled Aberdeen City Council currently intends £43.4 million cuts, 8 percent of its budget.

All councils are dipping into their reserves with Shetland Islands Council using reserves to fund as much as 24 percent of its annual spending. Earlier this year a survey found 7,000 council jobs to be immediately under threat, particularly in culture, arts and sports facilities.

The Labour Party's attitude to this onrushing social crisis was demonstrated in an area neighbouring Rutherglen and Hamilton West. Late September, North Lanarkshire's Labour-run authority, facing a funding gap of £64 million, announced its intention to close 39 swimming pools, libraries, community and sport centres. Among the threatened venues were community centres in Airdrie, Bellshill, Coatbridge, Cumbernauld,

Kilsyth, Motherwell, Shotts and Wishaw, seven local libraries, including a three-vehicle mobile service. Total saving would be a paltry £4.7 million.

The decision generated massive local opposition. One petition, organised by the Bellshill Sharks swimming club, collected 10,000 signatures in a few days. Concerned at the "optics" of the cuts coming so close to the Rutherglen and Hamilton West by election and derailing their election campaign led to the hasty reversal of the decision this week. North Lanarkshire Labour's Jim Logue told the press, "We have taken the decision to protect these important community assets, despite a total lack of support from the Scottish Government to do so."

Labour has also benefited from the shipwreck of the SNP's strategy for moving towards Scottish independence, which enabled Shanks to mount a limited campaign on bread-and-butter issues, such as the cost of living, opposing the Conservative government's cap on benefits for families having more than two children and for reforms to the Universal Credit welfare payments system. But Shanks, a schoolteacher, is a right-wing Labourite. Several times a candidate, in 2019, he resigned in order to solidarise himself with the witch-hunt against Corbyn organised around manufactured accusations of anti-Semitism, rejoining after the election of Starmer.

The Labour Party of Starmer, Sarwar and Shanks is no more capable of offering relief from the social disaster overwhelming working people in Scotland and throughout the UK than the Tories or the SNP. All three are parties devoted to NATO's war against Russia and hostilities toward China, to be paid by the working class through unprecedented austerity. Under these conditions, how far Starmer can rely on an anti-SNP/Tory bounce remains to be seen—especially as he doubles down on his real right-wing agenda in the run up to a general election.



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