

# The Road to Victory Runs Through Scotland? Prospects for Labour in the Post-Sturgeon Era

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## Abstract

Scottish Labour, once viewed as the most divided party in the UK, appears buoyant, the result of the growing popularity of its leader, Anas Sarwar, a more positive relationship with UK Labour, and most notably, significant gains in the polls. The party has sought to find a centre ground in a political system defined by opposing visions of Scotland's political future, a strategy which has previously left it squeezed between more assertive nationalist and unionist rivals. However, with little prospect of another independence referendum in the near term, this centre ground may yet prove fruitful. The party has an opportunity to position itself as a viable alternative in a dramatically changed political landscape. While Labour's optimism is not unfounded, its polling perhaps speaks more to the weaknesses of its political rivals than the strength of the party itself; and questions persist about Scottish Labour's political vision and constitutional offering in a political system which remains bifurcated.

**Keywords:** Labour, Scotland, nationalism, general election, Scottish National Party

SPEAKING TO THE Scottish Labour conference days after Scotland's longest serving first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, announced she was standing down, leader Anas Sarwar struck an optimistic note. He moved to reassure voters that the party, which had struggled since its ouster from government in 2007, was 'grown up, reaching out and ready for government'.<sup>1</sup> Scottish Labour, in partnership with a resurgent UK Labour, appeared confident and unified, particularly when contrasted with chaos within the Conservative government at Westminster and growing concern over the Scottish National Party's record in government.

Sarwar's confidence was matched by that of UK Labour leader, Keir Starmer, who has made multiple visits to Scotland in recent months and promised to deliver Labour governments in both London and Edinburgh which, in partnership, could deliver for Scotland.<sup>2</sup> Sturgeon's successor, Humza Yousaf, appears vulnerable to challenge after a bruising leadership contest and allegations of financial misconduct within

the SNP, whilst the Scottish Conservatives seem tainted by the unpopularity of the government at Westminster, with a leader who lacks the charisma of his predecessor. Labour's decisive victory in the Rutherglen and Hamilton West by-election in October 2023 reinforces the party's optimism, suggesting the possibility of a Labour comeback in Scotland, with important implications for the party's ability to form a government at the next UK general election, and for its performance in future Holyrood contests.

Analyses of Scottish Labour in recent years have focussed on a party stuck in the middle—between the ardent, and assertive unionism of the Conservatives and the nationalism of the SNP.<sup>3</sup> This left the party squeezed

<sup>3</sup>S. Bennet, D. Moon, N. Pearce and S. Whiting, 'Labouring under a delusion? Scotland's national questions and the crisis of the Scottish Labour Party', *Territory, Politics, Governance*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2021, pp. 656–674; C. Brown Swan, "'We're socialists not nationalists': British labour and the national question(s)", *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2023, pp. 467–481; C. Brown Swan, and M. Kenny, "We can't afford to be a branch office": the territorial dynamics of the British Labour Party, 2015–2019', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2022; <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsac022>

<sup>1</sup>A. Sarwar, Speech to Scottish Labour Conference, Edinburgh, 18 February 2023.

<sup>2</sup>K. Starmer, Speech to Scottish Labour Conference, Edinburgh, 18 February 2023.

electorally, with independence-minded supporters decamping to the SNP and those who prioritise the Union voting Conservative, with little left for Labour in the middle. Tactical voting in Scotland has become the norm, often to Labour's detriment, but the collapse of the Conservatives may mean that tactical voting may favour Labour, as a Conservative victory at Westminster seems increasingly unlikely.

The party has attempted, under a string of leaders and with limited success, to make a virtue out of this middle path. This strategy has been twofold: an emphasis on policy rather than the constitution; and on the potential for cooperation with UK Labour, promising reforms of the UK's constitutional structure to better reflect Scotland's political preferences. This has not, as yet, succeeded. But with Conservatives on the back foot, the SNP in political crisis, and little near-term prospect of a referendum following the UK Supreme Court's 2022 ruling on Scottish independence, this middle road may be widening. However, key questions remain. Is Labour's rise a result of the party's strength, or the weaknesses of its political rivals? How might Labour answer the independence question that has divided Scottish politics? And might success serve to highlight ideological/policy differences between the Scottish and UK parties?

Recent months have seen a flurry of activity, including the gathering in Edinburgh of Labour figures from throughout the UK under the banner of Stronger Scotland, A Better Britain. This event, as well as widespread campaigning ahead of the Rutherglen by-election, suggest a greater degree of engagement with Scotland as a general election nears. This article analyses Labour's positioning in the post-Sturgeon era, assessing the party's nascent strategy at a moment of both opportunity and risk. In so doing, it draws on recent speeches and contributions by Scottish and UK Labour leaders, as well as relevant polling data.

## Labour, Scotland and constitutional politics

Despite having delivered devolution, the UK and Scottish Labour parties have struggled to adapt to a new political landscape in Scotland.

Scottish Labour was unseated by the SNP in 2007. It has since struggled to define itself in a political landscape dominated by debates over Scotland's constitutional future, outbid by Conservative unionists and Scottish nationalists.

The defeat of the independence prospectus in 2014 failed to reduce the intensity of the debate over Scottish independence, adding to the Labour Party's woes. Following the referendum, the SNP's membership and support surged. Conservative rivals made political hay out of the prospect—then suggested by polling—of a Labour minority government which would have to seek support from the SNP, at the cost of another referendum. However, the polling was ultimately incorrect and in 2015 a Conservative majority was returned south of the border, whilst Labour, Liberal Democrats and Conservatives were reduced to a single seat in Scotland. This represented a fundamental shift in Scottish politics and set the stage for bids for another referendum. In the 2016 Scottish Parliament election, Labour was replaced by the Scottish Conservatives as the second-largest party at Holyrood—an outcome unimaginable a few years earlier. The differential results of the 2016 EU referendum reignited the independence debate in Scotland, a debate which, seven years later, remains a live one. The prolonged negotiation process and negative perceptions of the UK Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, elected following the Conservative victory in 2015, exacerbated the party's woes in Scotland.<sup>4</sup>

Disappointing election results, intense internal wrangling over the direction of the party and disputes between the two capitals, led to a succession of Scottish Labour leaders. The party's internal turmoil led to public perceptions of Scottish Labour as deeply divided and increasingly irrelevant to Scottish political life. Despite fourteen years in government and critiques over its handling of the pandemic, education and healthcare, the SNP was returned to office in 2021. At this moment, Scottish Labour's electoral decline appeared inexorable. Anas Sarwar, the party's current leader, took up the post just ten weeks ahead of the 2021 Holyrood election, promising

<sup>4</sup>Brown Swan and Kenny, "We Can't Afford to be a Branch Office".

**Table 1: Scottish voting intentions, UK general election**

|                   |     |
|-------------------|-----|
| The SNP           | 38% |
| Labour            | 27% |
| Conservatives     | 16% |
| Liberal Democrats | 7%  |
| Greens            | 6%  |

Source: YouGov and The Times polling, fieldwork 8–13 September 2023.

partnership with UK Labour and an alternative to the endless constitutional wrangling between the SNP and Conservatives.

Early 2023 saw a prolonged and decisive shift in polling for both UK and Scottish Labour. Labour in Scotland appears to have benefitted from an unpopular government at Westminster and the departure of the once hegemonic Nicola Sturgeon, with her successor forced to respond to allegations of financial misconduct in the party and facing increasingly vocal critics from within and outwith. Public perceptions of the SNP's competence in government have declined, with net negative scores across a range of policy areas, including education, the NHS, economic management and living standards.<sup>5</sup> The same polling from Ipsos MORI suggested that when asked about a Scottish Labour government, voters were marginally more positive, albeit with net negative scores, suggesting a general pessimism about the state of politics.<sup>6</sup>

At the time of writing, Labour has advanced in the polls in Scotland. The SNP still leads both Westminster and Holyrood vote intentions (Table 1), but with far less comfortable margins than seen even six months earlier.

Eight SNP MPs have announced that they will not stand in the next general election, creating additional opportunities for Labour to challenge the SNP's hegemony in Scottish seats. The number of marginal seats in Scotland, particularly given the scale of the by-election swing, has increased dramatically. High-profile selections are likely and familiar faces may return to Scottish politics, including Douglas Alexander, who has

<sup>5</sup>Ipsos MORI, *Scotland Political Pulse: September 2023*; <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-09/ipsos-scotland-political-pulse-charts-september-2023.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

announced his intention to stand for the seat of East Lothian, currently occupied by Kenny MacAskill who defected from the SNP to Alba in 2021.

Recent polling suggests that at Holyrood the gap in voting intentions has narrowed further, with a Panelbase poll conducted for the *Sunday Times* (Table 2) suggesting a very narrow lead for the SNP, one which, depending on the distribution of votes, could see the party challenged as the largest party in the Scottish Parliament. However, there are more than two years until the next Holyrood election.

While perceptions of all the main party leaders remain negative, Anas Sarwar's net approval rating (-8) is stronger than those of his rivals, Humza Yousaf (-12) and Douglas Ross (-47).<sup>7</sup> Labour has been further bolstered by a decisive victory for the party at the Rutherglen and Hamilton West by-election. For both Humza Yousaf and Anas Sarwar, the seat had symbolic significance. For Yousaf, a win would have been registered as a sign of confidence in his leadership and an assertion of loyalty to the SNP by Scottish voters. For Anas Sarwar, a victory signalled a nascent recovery for the party in Scotland and improved prospects of Labour both north and south. The Labour candidate, Michael Shanks, secured 58.6 per cent, a 24.1 per cent swing, which served as an electoral check for the SNP and the Conservative Party, the latter party losing its deposit. However, the increased media attention that is likely to accompany Labour's growing success also leads to increased scrutiny of the party's policies, and divides which may emerge between Scotland and London headquarters, as seen across the by-election campaign.

Scottish Labour's strategy consists of three core arguments, analysed in detail below. The first asserts that the SNP and Conservative obsession with independence has obscured the fact that people's real concern is on policies which effect their everyday lives. Policy failures at the Scottish and UK level are therefore ignored by both parties amidst constitutional wrangling and internal party turmoil. This contributes to the second plank, an appeal to those who have abandoned the party in recent years to return to the Labour Party, their natural home. In return, the party promises a fresh

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

**Table 2: Scottish Parliament voting intentions**

|                   | Regional | Constituency |
|-------------------|----------|--------------|
| SNP               | 29%      | 35%          |
| Labour            | 30%      | 32%          |
| Conservatives     | 18%      | 16%          |
| Liberal Democrats | 8%       | 7%           |
| Greens            | 12%      | 7%           |

Source: Panelbase poll for the *Sunday Times*, fieldwork 2–5 October 2023.

offering and readiness for government. The final plank is centred on constitutional reform, showcasing the party's proposals for a radical reorganising of the UK's institutions and structures. In each of these areas, the party is presented with opportunities to make a case for itself, but each also presents unique challenges in implementation.

### 'People's bills are going up, whether they voted yes or no'

Central to the party's pitch is that the ordinary voters do not truly care about the constitution, but instead worry about bread and butter issues like the NHS, education and the cost of living. The constitutional question, Labour argues, is a distraction from the issues that matter and from the SNP's litany of policy failures. In a debate on the cost of living, Anas Sarwar challenged the first minister on her plans to support people during this crisis, noting 'I hate to break it to the First Minister, but the cost of living crisis is happening right now. There is no independence or constitutional answer to that question. People's bills are going up, whether they voted yes or no.'<sup>8</sup> Subsequent contributions by Sarwar highlighted a range of policy proposals which, he argued, would alleviate some of the issues caused by both SNP and Tory mismanagement.

In the face of calls for another referendum, Labour counters that it is not the constitutional arrangements governing Scotland and the

<sup>8</sup>A. Sarwar, Contribution to First Minister's Questions, 17 March 2022; <https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/official-report/search-what-was-said-in-parliament/chamber-and-committees/official-report/what-was-said-in-parliament/meeting-of-parliament-17-03-2022?meeting=13646&iob=123857>

whole of the UK which have the greatest impact on the lives of everyday people, but the parties who govern them. Rather than focus on critical policy areas, both the SNP and Tories have exploited crises for their own gain, mobilising nationalist sentiment to avoid taking responsibility for poor outcomes on their watch. This, Labour partisans argue, is true of both parties—the SNP in its pursuit of independence, and the Conservatives in their pursuit of Brexit and an increasingly right-wing political agenda.

Rather than address issues of rising costs, declining standards in public services and economic uncertainty, the party argues that it's rivals have engaged in conflict and blaming. In an interview in the *Times*, Anas Sarwar drew a sharp contrast between himself and Nicola Sturgeon, the then-first minister, stressing Labour's approach to unity: 'Nicola Sturgeon is a division politician, I am a unity politician. She wants to create an us-versus-them across the country. She is an anger-driven politician, in the sense she wants to feed off anger and despair. I want to build an alliance across the country, I want to deliver empathy and hope to people.'<sup>9</sup>

Throughout this period, Scottish Labour's leadership painted a grim picture of the post-pandemic UK, arguing that only Labour, free from the entanglements of constitutional debates, could address these problems. This is an argument Labour has been making for quite some time, but it may prove more fruitful given the declining salience of the independence question, at least in the immediate term. The Supreme Court ruling that an independence referendum, consultative or not, was outwith the remit of the Scottish Parliament presents a significant obstacle to the SNP's independence bid. The party has attempted to regroup, offering an alternative mechanism by which Scottish voters could express their support for independence, but the viability of this Westminster approach seems limited, particularly in response to recent polling suggesting a Labour comeback in Scotland. Without a clear route to another referendum, Labour's demand to focus on more pressing policy

<sup>9</sup>M. Linklater, 'Anas Sarwar: Scottish Labour's time has come', *Times*, 26 November 2022; <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/anas-sarwar-scottish-labours-time-has-come-bbkjnsrlw>

issues may have greater resonance, particularly as people feel the effects of the cost of living crisis. Coupled with the increasingly likely prospect of a Labour government at Westminster, this resonance may increase, but perhaps overlooks the very difficult economic environment and policy choices facing an incoming Labour government.

## Labour as a ‘credible alternative’

Scottish Labour has made an ardent appeal to former Labour voters who have, in recent years, taken their vote elsewhere. They are urged to come home to a renewed and reinvigorated Labour Party which promises to welcome voters and represent their views. However, the nature of Labour’s decline in recent elections—with the exodus taking place in two waves, to two different parties, makes a universal argument more challenging. Voters decamped first to the SNP in 2015, motivated by the prospective of a progressive vision of independence, and a further tranche of former Labour voters moved to the Conservatives in 2017 in an effort to prioritise the Union.<sup>10</sup> To regain these voters the party must make a simultaneous appeal to those supportive of independence and those who left Labour in search of a more ardently unionist party.

Faced with polling suggesting Scottish Labour would challenge the Conservatives for the mantle of second place at Holyrood, Sarwar noted the scale of the accomplishment while pledging to do more: ‘But we are not settling for second place. Our ambition must always be to win, so we can deliver for communities and enact real change. Both the SNP and the Tories have been failing Scotland for far too long, squandering our country’s potential and settling for managed decline’.<sup>11</sup> Scottish Labour attempts to paint the

Conservatives and nationalists with the same broad brush in posing equal threats to the future of the Union—an argument also well-used by party grandee, Gordon Brown. Labour, Sarwar argues, must be a credible alternative to the ‘muscular Unionism of the Tories and the blindfolded nationalism of the SNP’.<sup>12</sup> Only Labour, in government in London and Edinburgh, can pursue progressive social and economic policy, and in so doing, resist centrifugal pressures and demands for independence. Outlining the case for Labour governments in London and Edinburgh, Sarwar called for those who had previously voted Conservative to reconsider. He challenged the Tories’ unionist credentials and economic competence: ‘If you want a strong economy, it is Labour that will deliver it. If you want our country to stand strong in the world, it is only Labour that can rebuild our standing in the world. And if you value Scotland’s place within the UK, only Labour can now hold us together.’ Rather than strengthening the Union through a policy of muscular unionism, he argued the successive Conservative leaders had instead undermined the Union, and their record in government was a ‘gift for the nationalists’, having served as ‘a human shield for the SNP for 13 years’.<sup>13</sup>

Sarwar’s critiques of the SNP were equally damning, but were coupled with an acknowledgement of the need to appeal to ‘yes’ voters, who had more progressive ideological positions. He was cautious in his approach to Nicola Sturgeon’s resignation, praising her commitment to public service, suggesting that he was cognisant of her continued popularity. In the Scottish parliamentary debate marking the first minister’s final day in office, he was gracious, in contrast to the bullishness of Conservative leader, Douglas Ross. In his conference speech, made just a few days after the shock announcement, he made a direct appeal to SNP voters, and those who have been persuaded of the case for independence:

<sup>10</sup>S. Brown, ‘Illustrating the spectacular decline of Labour in Scotland and the revival of the Scottish Conservatives’, LSE British Politics & Policy blog, 29 April 2017; <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/decline-of-labour-and-the-revival-of-the-scottish-conservatives/>

<sup>11</sup>A. Sarwar, ‘Scotland is desperate for change. We must show we are the party to deliver it’, *LabourList*, 17 February 2023; <https://labourlist.org/2023/02/scotland-is-desperate-for-change-we-must-show-we-are-the-party-to-deliver-it/>

<sup>12</sup>K. Andrews, ‘Keir Starmer must learn from Scottish Labour mistakes, says Anas Sarwar’, *Times*, 16 July 2023; <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/starmer-must-learn-from-scottish-labour-mistakes-says-anwar-gnn6w5ssb>

<sup>13</sup>Sarwar, Speech to Scottish Labour Conference, 2023.

We understand your desire for change. We share it. We recognise your desire to get rid of the Tories. We share it. We know you dream of a brighter future. It's a dream we share because this isn't as good as it gets. You deserve better. Scotland deserves better. So let's come together and boot the Tories out of Downing Street, because that's the change Scotland needs.<sup>14</sup>

Sarwar attributes their frustration to the actions of a Tory government, which had led to the desperate search for a political alternative, rather than a deep-seated commitment to Scotland's independence. In so doing, he challenged the view that independence offers an off ramp from right-wing policies: 'I am appealing to those whose frustration, which I share, is driven by the fact we have a Tory government. You might disagree about our final destination, but we can agree about getting rid of this government, so let us go on that journey together.'<sup>15</sup>

The way out of a Tory Britain is not independence, Labour figures argue, but the election of a Labour government at Westminster. Independence would only lead to accelerated austerity as an independent Scotland attempted to balance the books. Polling suggests a decoupling of support for the SNP and for independence. Whilst support for the SNP has dipped, independence support remains relatively stable. This enables Scottish Labour to make an appeal to those generally supportive of Scottish independence, but who prioritise other policies in the near to medium term. With little prospect of a referendum in the near term, these voters might be particularly amenable to a progressive vision of the UK.

The Labour leadership is attempting to make an asset of the sequencing of the next UK-wide and devolved elections, arguing that voters will see first what can be done at the centre and then seek to maximise this through partnership with a Labour-led government at Holyrood. This government would allow for progressive social and economic policies, obviating the case for independence. Starmer has

described the potential for Labour to 'build a fairer, greener, more dynamic Scotland, in a fairer, greener, more dynamic Labour Britain'.<sup>16</sup> However, there is an inherent risk to this sequencing. If Labour wins the next UK general election, it seems likely that the party will inherit a very challenging policy environment, given the cost of living crisis, long-running industrial disputes and crisis within the NHS, coupled with budgetary constraints.

Divides are already evident between the party in Edinburgh and in London, particularly over gender recognition reform, a policy which Scottish Labour pledged to support, and the two-child benefit cap, which caused conflict over the summer and became a theme of the Rutherglen by-election campaign. The SNP used the opportunity to call into question the independence of Scottish Labour, with the party's Westminster leader arguing: 'What Keir Starmer, who is the real power within the Labour party and not Anas Sarwar, has said is that if his government comes to power next year, then they are not going to offer change to the people of Scotland'.<sup>17</sup> More divides are likely to emerge over the course of the general election campaign and early years of a Labour government as Labour seeks to speak to voters in England and in Scotland, who may hold increasingly divergent views. We can expect SNP campaigners to make political capital out of policy differences and any cuts to spending which may enacted.

## 'Faster and safer change': reforming the United Kingdom

Keir Starmer's tenure as UK party leader has seen a greater degree of party engagement with the constitutional questions then evident under his predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn. However, there are few signs of a deep-seated engagement by Starmer himself. Instead, work on the constitution has largely been delegated to former prime minister, Gordon Brown, who convened the Commission on the UK's

<sup>16</sup>K. Starmer, Speech to Conference, September 2022; <https://labour.org.uk/updates/press-releases/keir-starmer-conference-speech/>

<sup>17</sup>BBC News, 'Scottish Labour oppose UK leader Starmer on two-child benefit cap', 18 July 2023; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-66232161>

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>M. Linklater, 'Anas Sarwar: Scottish Labour's time has come', *Times*, 26 November 2022; <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/anas-sarwar-scottish-labours-time-has-come-bbkjnslrw>

Future, publishing a report setting out a blueprint for reform. This report is to serve as the basis for UK Labour going forward, but conflict over certain aspects appears likely and questions remain on how these significant reforms might be pursued alongside pressing policy priorities.

The proposals are sweeping and encompass both the Celtic nations and England, oft neglected in discussions of constitutional reform. They include constitutionally enshrined economic and social rights, an extension of powers to England, entrenching the constitutional status of the devolved institutions, and the replacement of the unelected House of Lords with an Assembly of Nations and Regions, which would see a significant increase in the input of the devolved nations at the centre. Advocates of the proposals argue that this would offer a viable, workable alternative to independence, without the devastating economic and political costs that separation would entail:

The alternative we put before the people of Scotland and Wales is better than either costly and destructive independence and a stagnating status quo: change within the United Kingdom that can entrench self-government in Scotland whilst improving shared government across Britain and we believe that our recommendations offer not just faster and safer change, but fairer change.<sup>18</sup>

Labour leaders stress the need to address the concerns of Scotland, but also those of the rest of the United Kingdom, transferring powers both out and down. However, the extensive nature of the proposed changes may undermine the party's ability to make a specific pitch to Scotland—and to deliver these changes once in government. Although Labour was the party that delivered devolution, its appetite for further constitutional change seems muted, beyond the advocacy of Gordon Brown and his closest allies. Given the pressing economic decisions an incoming Labour government is likely to face, it is unclear both how much

capacity and will may be available for constitutional change, and whether these reforms will satisfy the demands of those in Scotland and, to a lesser degree, in Wales whose sights seem set on independence.

## A new era for Scottish Labour?

2022 marked a turning point in Labour's once grim electoral prospects and it has since benefitted from Sturgeon's surprise resignation and revelations, yet to be fully developed, about the SNP's management and finances. Sarwar appears effective in First Minister's Questions, confidently attacking the SNP's long record in government, from finances to ferries, and challenging the assertion that independence is necessary to address the problems of the day.

At the time of writing, in autumn 2023, the Scottish Labour Party, and its leadership, appears palpably optimistic about its position within Scottish politics, an optimism buoyed by the party's by-election victory and polling which suggests that Scottish Labour is once more a force to be reckoned with. While the Conservatives are occupied with matters at Westminster and experiencing a precipitous decline in public support, and the SNP is beset by scandal, Labour attempts to position itself as above the fray, internally unified in the face of the disunity of its rivals, both an effective party of opposition and a serious contender for government. In Scotland, Labour now sits comfortably in second place in the polls, appearing more effective as a party of opposition than its Conservative rival. Name recognition and net favourability ratings have increased, and Sarwar contrasts favourably with Conservative and SNP leaders.

However, second place is not yet first, and the SNP's support has remained surprisingly stable in the face of scandal, as has support for independence, which presents a thorny question for Labour, whose standard answer to the independence question is to stress policy rather than the constitution, but this has not, as yet, satisfied Scottish voters. Starmer has said that he would not support a referendum in the first term of a Labour government, and politicians in both London and Edinburgh have sought to swerve the issue, afraid any answer would provide fuel for their political rivals.

<sup>18</sup>Report of the Commission on the UK's Future, *A New Britain: Renewing Our Democracy and Rebuilding our Economy*, Labour Party, 2022; <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Commission-on-the-UKs-Future.pdf>.

Electoral success for the UK Labour Party at Westminster would serve to further bolster the party, particularly if it regains a significant number of seats in Scotland. Starmer in Downing Street would deprive the SNP of one of their most effective arguments—the need for independence to escape Tory policies and incompetence. The party in both capitals would be able to stress the potential for cooperative working relationships and the benefits a Labour government at Westminster would bring to Scotland. But, if Labour wins at Westminster, it is likely to inherit a challenging economic situation and it is not clear whether policies pursued by a Labour government committed to stressing its economically responsible credentials and appealing to the English ‘red wall’ would resonate in the same way with a Scottish electorate.

Fast-forwarding to the 2026 Holyrood election campaign, the SNP will be asking voters to endorse it for a fifth term, marking nearly two decades in power. The party may, in the next two years, experience challenges to Humza Yousaf’s leadership, further revelations about its management of party finances, and rifts—dynamics which each may strengthen Labour’s position. The SNP is likely to stress future elections as opportunities to express support for independence, a strategy Labour may be able to capitalise on, arguing that the obsessive pursuit of independence has contributed to a litany of policy failures. Without a clear path to another referendum, independence supporters may turn their sights towards Labour once again.

However, the timing may pose a challenge if, as predicted, a Labour government at Westminster is forced to undertake cuts to balance

the UK’s increasingly unstable books. In Scotland, Labour has historically found it difficult to occupy a distinctive space on the political spectrum, with its manifestos broadly similar to those of the SNP, except, of course, on the question of independence. It critiques the SNP’s record in government, cataloguing its failures in education and health, but the last Labour government is a distant memory for many voters and it is unclear what exactly a Labour government at Holyrood would do differently.

Scottish Labour must simultaneously appeal to those committed to the Union, but disillusioned with the Conservatives, as well as those committed to independence who may view a progressive Labour government as a consolation prize for their ultimate ambitions. But, as the Rutherglen by-election indicates, there are policy differences between north and south which are likely to be illuminated and then exploited by the SNP as Labour’s manifesto for the next general election takes shape. Labour once again is seeking a middle road in its pursuit of power, both north and south of the border, attempting to be the grown-up in the room, offering a coherent, united proposal, while its political rivals turn their focus inward. However, this middle way remains challenging, and while Labour’s prospects in the post-Sturgeon era appear sunnier, many challenges await it on the road to power.

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