DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 29.03.2023 | Jan Eichhorn

Rocky roads ahead for Scotland's largest party

In Edinburgh, Humza Yousaf succeeds Nicola Sturgeon as SNP leader. Four lessons learned for Scotland's upcoming political upheaval

The election of Humza Yousaf to succeed Nicola Sturgeon as leader of the centre-left, social democratic Scottish National Party (SNP) is a major change in Scotland's political landscape. After Alex Salmond, who in 2007 first led the party to power in the Scottish Parliament, and Sturgeon, who brought further electoral successes starting in 2014, this does not just change the SNP's situation. The upheaval will also accelerate changes in the country's larger political debate.

Four lessons can be drawn from the election.

Firstly, the different wings of the SNP will remain more visible. The last open competition for SNP leadership took place in 2004. Thus, for the first time in a long time, the debates in recent weeks made the general public aware of the deep divisions within the party. Consistent electoral successes and Sturgeon's strong leadership had made the SNP appear more united than it was. In recent years, the party leadership has increasingly focused on liberal social reforms (such as the right to gender self-determination from age 16) that clashed with the views of a substantial minority of its more socially conservative members. While the SNP presents itself as a clearly *pro*-EU party, a significant minority of its members still want an independent Scotland *outside* the EU.

The SNP is going to experience what often happens to parties that win 40 to 50 per cent of the vote, in which factional disputes aren't just fought internally but

Yousaf was able to win the day as the continuity candidate who basically wants to stick to the SNP's current strategy. However, his scant 52 per cent of votes in the second round reveals party divisions. Former Finance Secretary Kate Forbes, who came in second, wanted to reposition the party – as Alex Salmond had done – as a centrist party. Forbes stood for economic growth with a strong industrial policy

increasingly also publicly.

and social balance. In contrast, Yousaf wants to introduce wealth taxes. Forbes was criticised for views consistent with her membership in the socially conservative Free Church of Scotland, especially in relation to same-sex marriage and transgender rights; Yousaf stands for further developing the SNP's current socially liberal agenda. The 48 per cent who support Forbes are unlikely to persuade her to give up the debate. On the contrary: they're more visible now. The SNP is going to experience what often happens to parties that win 40 to 50 per cent of the vote, in which factional disputes aren't just fought internally but increasingly also publicly.

The question of Scottish independence

Secondly, the route to independence remains contentious – and becomes rockier. One of the most important differences in the race for SNP leadership was about how to achieve the party's key concern, Scottish independence. Particularly Ash Reagan, who placed third, pressed for a more assertive and harder approach. A significant part of the independence movement – including outside the SNP – agrees with her about more strongly disengaging from limits set by Westminster. However, like Sturgeon, Yousaf is steering a middle course that is focused on getting a legally binding vote on independence by gradually upping the pressure on the government in London.

As a result, the first minister-designate and new SNP leader is being pressured by two sides. One includes groups like the small, socially conservative independence party *Alba* that had split from the SNP under Alex Salmond, along with some in Yousaf's own party who continually demand that he do more. Yousaf wants to appoint a new cabinet secretary to advance the cause of independence – but that will hardly pacify them. On the other side, the population's priorities are shifting. Although a large share of people in Scotland still support independence (most recently an average shy of 50 per cent), fewer now want a referendum straight away.

Thirdly, the opposition will increasingly pressure Yousaf regarding specific issues. For weeks, the opposition parties in the Scottish Parliament (Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) have been attacking the government's record. Next to the controversial 'Gender Reform Recognition (Scotland) Bill', they point out that the SNP has failed to meet its own goals, such as those for education (class size), domestic

affairs (drug-related crime) and infrastructure (e.g., the 'Islands Connectivity Plan'). They especially focus on the first minister-designate. As justice secretary from 2018 to 2021, Yousaf was responsible for highly controversial anti-discrimination laws, some of which were poorly written. As health secretary from 2021, he had to explain why waiting times targets are relatedly being missed.

For the 37-year-old, the Scottish independence movement and the Scottish National Party itself, the next few years will be their most challenging since coming to power.

Yousaf cannot just point out that he had to assume responsibility for the healthcare system during the pandemic: he will be blamed for all of the SNP government's failings over the last 16 years. Six to seven years ago, the opposition had already scored points by criticising government actions. Under then party leader Kezia Dugdale, for a short time, the Scottish Labour Party even rose sharply in the polls with respect to a number of substantive issues, and the SNP lost significant votes in the 2017 general election. But with Brexit approaching, the focus shifted back to the constitutional question, which partly overshadowed other issues.

Fourthly, the changing political situation creates a huge challenge for the SNP. It is still far from certain that a sustainable aversion towards the SNP will develop as a result of factual criticism – without a *new* all-British constitutional crisis. Scottish polls continue to give the party a commanding lead. True, Labour has recovered somewhat, but mostly by winning over Conservative voters in the Unionist camp. Yousaf can still distance himself from Rishi Sunak's government by introducing specifically Scottish measures, such as increased support for young families. But what will happen if the Conservatives in Westminster are ousted in the next general election and Keir Starmer and the Labour Party take over? Would Scottish Labour also get a boost and increase the minority of its electorate who support independence? Or would approval for independence disappear if Conservatives are no longer the bogeyman in London?

At the moment, one can only speculate. However, it is clear that Yousaf is taking over a party and a government from Sturgeon that faces a plethora of challenges. The new party leader and soon-to-be first minister lacks his predecessor's aura to help him tackle them with a party that is outwardly less united – while the political situation in the United Kingdom as a whole is in a state of flux. For the 37-year-old, the Scottish independence movement and the Scottish National Party itself, the next few years will

be their most challenging since coming to power.



Jan Eichhorn
Edinburgh

Dr Jan Eichhorn is research director of the non-partisan think tank d|part and coordinates the project 'Situation Room - What does the open society mean to Europeans?' in collaboration with the Open Societies European Policy Institute. He is also Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Edinburgh.