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What is Labour's strategy in Scotland?

Brexit has led to a surge in support for Scottish independence. But Labour leader Keir Starmer rejects another referendum

With the new EU-UK relationship in place and the UK's transition over, Brexit is now real. Most of the practical consequences of the UK's withdrawal from the EU materialised only at the start of this year, producing wide-ranging implications that remain to be appreciated. In Scotland, Brexit has long since become intertwined with the independence debate – the latter giving rise to the serious possibility of a new referendum on Scottish independence.

The Labour Party was once the dominant political movement in Scotland. It led the Scottish Government (then called the Scottish Executive) through successive governing coalitions from its inception in 1999 until 2007, when it lost to the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP). The SNP has remained in power since, under minority and majority governments. After the 2014 independence referendum, Scottish Labour declined even further. It lost 40 seats in the House of Commons to the SNP in the 2015 UK general election, and in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election the party finished third, behind the Scottish Conservatives.

For Labour, the question of Scotland's future is therefore a multifaceted challenge, connected to its principles, response to Brexit, approach to devolution, vision for the UK and electoral prospects. The independence debate will be central to the upcoming Scottish Parliament election, currently scheduled for this May. Public opinion has notably shifted in favour of independence, with 17 consecutive published opinion polls showing majority support for statehood among decided voters. As Keir Starmer seeks to reshape Labour under his leadership, Scotland should prove a recurrent theme.

Starmer's approach to Scottish

independence

Labour's opposition to Scottish independence is a core element of its platform, both in Scotland and the wider UK. Nevertheless, the party supported the 2014 independence referendum as a means for Scotland to decide its own future. It therefore faces the difficulty of reconciling its antipathy towards independence with substantial newfound support for it among the Scottish public. During his tenure as leader, Jeremy Corbyn often appeared ambivalent on a new independence referendum, aligning more with the principle of self-determination than the desire to preserve the UK union.

Similar to his pivots from other aspects of Corbynism, Keir Starmer has adopted a different approach to the Scottish independence debate. In a speech last month on Scotland and devolution, Starmer set out Labour's firm rejection of a new referendum for the foreseeable future. He announced plans for a 'Constitutional Commission' which the party will establish to consider the redistribution of power from Westminster to the various parts of the UK, and to produce specific proposals for Scotland as an alternative to independence. The objective is to have the Scotland proposals ready in advance of the Scottish election, so that they can form part of the party's offer to voters.

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Starmer has clearly decided to take a more resolute stance against a new referendum than his predecessor. Yet, while the strategy outlined in his speech might aid Labour in regaining former support in England and Wales lost to the Conservatives, it could well hinder rather than help the party in Scotland. For instance, Starmer consistently labelled Scottish independence as 'separatism'. Such language is bound to alienate many voters, and it fails to give adequate appreciation to the reality that believing in independence is now a prevalent, mainstream position in Scottish society. Among the decided, support for a Scottish state has reached 58 per cent – surely including significant numbers of current and former Labour voters.

The Labour leader also made relatively little mention of Brexit, other than to highlight his disagreement with how the Conservatives have carried it out. Beyond the speech, Starmer has made clear his acceptance of the UK's departure from the EU and its post-membership relationship

with the Union. That approach is pragmatic in England, where the battle on EU membership is arguably over. However, it is far from over in Scotland. Brexit has been the principal driver of the increased support for independence, and Scotland's relationship with the EU is a defining aspect of the independence debate. If it aims to attract voters, Labour will not be able to sidestep the ongoing focus of Scottish politics on Europe.

On the notion of a referendum, Starmer stated that the UK Government should not 'grant' any new referendum proposed by the Scottish Government amidst the uncertainty caused by Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic. His reasoning indicates that, in the unresolved dispute over the locus of Scotland's democratic authority, he sides with the view that sovereignty rests with the UK state and its institutions, rather than the Scottish public and the Scottish Parliament. Many in Scotland believe the opposite. Nevertheless, his argument that a referendum should not happen in the immediate future seems to align with public opinion. Despite the stronger backing for independence, opinion polls suggest that holding a new referendum is not ranked highly among the priorities of Scottish voters.

The role of Labour in a future referendum

While Labour would prefer to avoid the constitution and Brexit, these issues persist in their centre-stage roles in Scottish politics. The coronavirus pandemic has focused attention on the kinds of economic and social questions which could be solid ground for Labour – but even the recovery from the pandemic is being integrated into the independence debate. Scottish Labour is currently competing with the Scottish Conservatives for a distant second-place finish in the forthcoming Holyrood election, far behind the SNP's anticipated victory. Should the SNP win a majority, or the SNP and Scottish Greens together secure a large pro-independence majority, Labour will be faced with a choice over whether to reluctantly accept a new referendum or to continue with its present opposition.

If a future independence referendum does take place, Labour will be obliged to set out once more its case for maintaining the UK union. However, Scottish Labour's diminished status – it finished fifth in the 2019 European Parliament election and lost all but one of its seats in the 2019 UK Parliament election – means that its ability to influence voters could be limited. Gordon Brown, the last Labour UK prime minister, was an influential pro-UK voice in the 2014 referendum, notably at the end of the campaign. Starmer announced in his devolution speech that

Brown would advise the Constitutional Commission. Yet, it is unclear what role Brown might assume in a future referendum.

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It reflects Labour's declined fortunes in Scotland that the person most often suggested as the potential figurehead of the pro-UK campaign for a new referendum is not a Labour politician but Ruth Davidson, the former leader of the Scottish Conservatives. Davidson is standing down from the Scottish Parliament at the next election and will take up a place in the House of Lords, having been nominated as a life peer by Boris Johnson. Starmer would presumably seek to play some role himself in the campaign, but probably not as its leader. In the 2014 referendum, most English politicians were reluctant to be seen as prominent campaigners in what was a decision for the people of Scotland.

Labour's arguments against independence

Beyond personalities, Labour's substantive case against independence would undoubtedly be founded on the premise that a future Labour UK Government could deliver change for Scotland, rendering its departure from the UK unnecessary. Regardless of the chances of Labour assuming power at Westminster in the near future, the party will have to confront difficult realities attached to that central pledge. Promises of new powers for Scotland would likely be well received, but the process of Brexit has demonstrated that nothing about devolution is guaranteed. Voters might well be concerned that any reforms could be easily reversed by a subsequent UK Government at its will.

Most significantly for Labour, increased support for independence demonstrates that many in Scotland no longer believe that solidarity requires political union with the rest of the UK. Instead, European solidarity through the EU is becoming the preferred option. To regain relevance in Scotland and to persuade the Scottish electorate not to choose statehood, Labour will have to recognise the aspirational arguments for independence that have found favour within Scottish society and craft viable alternatives that prove equally compelling.



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