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### UK politics

# What next for the SNP?

This article should be read alongside 'What next for the Liberal Democrats?' by Alex Alcoe

Politics students who do not live in Scotland sometimes disregard the importance of the Scottish National Party (SNP). In fact, the party is in many ways much more significant than the Liberal Democrats. In Parliament, it has 43 out of 59 Scottish seats. Unlike the Lib Dems, it actually benefits from the first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system, as its vote is very concentrated. In the Scottish Parliament – elected proportionally using the Additional Member System (AMS) – it holds 63 out of 129 seats and is in government. However, various crises have now put the party in a difficult position as the next election approaches, with the Labour Party expecting a revival of its fortunes in Scotland.

## Origins and devolution

The party was founded in 1934 with the amalgamation of two Scottish political parties, but it didn't get its first MP until 1967. It has had representation at Westminster ever since. It was founded on the principle of Scottish **self-determination** and **civil nationalism**, but it has not always supported full **independence**. Ideologically, it has moved across the political spectrum, but it has attempted to remain a broad church, united by its commitment to nationalism.

The **devolution** referendum in 1997 led to the creation of the Holyrood Parliament in Edinburgh and the transfer of significant powers to the new Scottish Parliament. The SNP supported the 'Yes/Yes' campaign, even though this was in part a policy designed by the New Labour government to reduce support for independence. Devolution has provided the SNP with the opportunity to be in government and to prove its effectiveness and commitment to the Scottish people. There was a further transfer of power to Scotland with the Scotland Act 2016.

### Key terms

**Self-determination** The right of a nation and its citizens to determine its own future.

**Civil nationalism** An inclusive form of nationalism based on shared values rather than ethnic origins.

**Independence** The creation of a sovereign state.

**Devolution** The transfer of power from a higher to a lower regional authority.

## The modern party

Today the SNP is committed to independence from the UK and it campaigns for Scotland to rejoin the European Union. It describes itself as a centre-left and social democratic party. The 2021 party manifesto included pledges to:

- hold a second referendum on independence
- increase pay for all NHS staff by at least 4%

- build 10,000 affordable homes
- create a National Care Service
- provide universal free school meals for primary pupils
- nationalise ScotRail

## Highs and lows

From 2007 the SNP dominated Scottish politics. Under the leadership of Alex Salmond, it initially formed a minority government but then defied expectations by forming a majority government in 2011 (this was surprising, as proportional voting systems tend to lead to coalitions or minority governments). However, the narrow victory of the 'No' campaign in the Scottish Independence referendum in 2014 (with an astounding 84.6% turnout) was a great disappointment, as was the Brexit referendum in 2016 (where the majority of Scottish voters supported the Remain campaign). Salmond was replaced in 2014 by another charismatic and talented politician, Nicola Sturgeon. The 2015 general election saw a revival of the party's fortunes when it increased its number of MPs from 6 to 56, all but destroying the Scottish Labour Party (who were left with just one MP). The SNP was a minority government from 2016 and then in coalition with the Scottish Greens from 2021.

The SNP has faced a major crisis since 2021 with police investigations (Operation Branchform) into its funding. Both Sturgeon and her husband have been questioned, although neither has yet faced any charges. Sturgeon resigned as first minister of Scotland in 2023 and was replaced, after a divisive contest, by Humza Yousaf, seen as a continuity candidate. Party membership and donations have declined significantly. Alex Salmond has set up his own new political party, the Alba Party, which has yet to make any electoral impact, but is clearly designed to rival the SNP. The SNP government has been criticised by both Labour and Conservative politicians for its many perceived failures: poor educational outcomes and long NHS waiting lists, for example.

## The outlook in 2024

With a general election this year, the SNP faces a major challenge from the resurgent Labour Party in Scotland. In order to win a majority at Westminster, Labour needs to win seats in Scotland and the party will therefore spend considerable time and resources doing this. In the election campaign the SNP is likely to focus on its plan to rejoin the EU, contrasting itself to what it calls the 'pro-Brexit Labour Party'.

## Using the SNP as an example in essay questions

- The significance of the SNP shows that the UK has a multi-party, not a two-party, system.
- The SNP's majority governments in Holyrood show that proportional voting systems do not necessarily lead to coalition or weak governments.
- The number of SNP MPs in Westminster in comparison to the number of Liberal Democrats shows that FPTP benefits parties with concentrated votes.
- If you study nationalism, the SNP is an example of inclusive, civil, liberal nationalism.

***Student tasks***

- 1 Create an essay plan for one of the following questions:
  - Evaluate the view that we now have a multi-party system in the UK. (Edexcel)
  - 'The UK no longer has a two-party system.' Analyse and evaluate this statement. (AQA)
- 2 Examine recent polling online. Is it still the case that the SNP is in serious electoral trouble?

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