

Competence, change and continuity: a tale of two nations



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In this election much of what we had come to expect in Scottish politics has changed, while Welsh politics was at first glance characterised by continuity. The SNP's dominance in Scotland appears to have been shattered, having had their worst election result since 2010, losing 39 seats while retaining only 9 MPs. Plaid, on the surface of it, had a steady election matching their 2019 performance by winning 4 seats. Welsh Labour also seemingly continued their hegemony in Wales, gaining 6 seats to win 27/32 Welsh seats. However, in Wales the number of seats won by Plaid and Labour only tell part of the story. Labour's vote share actually fell by 3.9% and Plaid's increased by 4.9% to 14.8%, the highest the party has ever achieved at a General Election.

A key aspect of how both the SNP and Welsh Labour have been able to dominate Scottish and Welsh politics since 2011 is their exploitation of vertical competency assessments. The multileveled structure of devolution, alongside the Conservatives having held office at Westminster since 2010, has allowed the SNP and Welsh Labour to define politics as the devolved administrations vs Westminster, portraying the Conservative government as anglo-centric and in no way concerned with the welfare of working class people in Scotland and Wales. As Chris Hanlon former SNP policy convenor described this strategy: "There's an old Garfield cartoon where he says if you want to look thin, stand next to a hippopotamus and certainly, if you want to be viewed as a credible party of government, stand next to the Conservative government". This strategy has served both the SNP and Welsh Labour well to date, as both the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey and The Welsh Election Study found voters since 2010 have been consistently more likely to credit the devolved administrations for improvements in the economy, while more likely to blame Westminster Conservatives for the economy weakening. However, such a strategy cannot preserve an image of competence if a party becomes the victim of their own internal divides and scandals, as we saw to varying extents in the SNP and Welsh Labour leading up to the general election.

In this election the swing of around 20% from the SNP to Labour in central belt constituencies suggests that the SNP's internal political controversies have badly damaged the party. The SNP's woes started when they lost their talismanic leader, Nicola Sturgeon, in 2023 due to a multitude of factors involving financial scandals, divisions in the party over gender reform and the strategy to achieve independence. Her successor Humza Yousaf, suffered a disastrous and short tenure. Yousaf's end came with his ill-advised and rash move to end the SNP's power-sharing agreement with their sole allies, the Scottish Greens. These

factors, combined with a soured relationship with the Scottish Greens, left a difficult context for Yousaf's successor to inherit. John Swinney stood as the only candidate to replace him, pledging to unify the party. Equally, any hopes of a gentle honeymoon period for Swinney quickly vanished when Rishi Sunak called a snap election just one month after his appointment as leader.

Plaid likewise have undergone a change of leadership in recent years. Rhun ap Iorwerth became leader in June 2023, after Adam Price resigned due to an internal report which found a culture of misogyny and bullying in the party. However, unlike the SNP, internal party controversies appear to not have impacted the party's image so badly. Plaid's priority now is presenting concrete workable economic policies such as windfall taxes and £4 billion in HS2 compensation to Wales. Evidence of independence being set aside was apparent in their 2024 manifesto, where independence does not feature until page 42. The change from Price's fixed timeframe of a referendum on independence within 5 years, to Iorwerth's focus on winning over voters on 'bread and butter' issues is a stark change from an idealistic strategy to a more pragmatic one that has evidently paid off in this election. Plaid were also aided by both the perceived incompetency of the Conservative party at Westminster (COVID & Liz Truss's budget) and also Welsh Labour at the Senedd (the scandal surrounding Vaughan Gething's 'dodgy donations'). Labour and Conservative voters swung to Plaid in all 4 seats they won.

While the SNP and Welsh Labour's recent internal troubles may have caused them both to lose voters (albeit to different extents) perhaps the more worrying development arising from this election for both parties is that, with the end of a Conservative Westminster government, the exploitation of vertical competency assessments are jeopardised. The SNP will no longer be able to paint a Labour Westminster government as the 'nasty party' as effectively due to being closer to them on the left-right spectrum. The strategy will be entirely redundant for the Welsh Labour government, in being unable to attack their colleagues at Westminster. In Wales this presents a huge opportunity for Plaid to become the new primary beneficiaries of such attacks on Westminster and, with the electoral wipe-out of the Conservatives in Wales, potentially even the party best placed to end Labour's hegemony in Welsh elections.