Scottish Parliament elections: a balance between continuity and change

The independence-supporting Scottish National Party (SNP) [**3**] became the largest party for the fifth consecutive time since the Parliament was re-established in 1999, though it fell short of a majority. The SNP have been the largest party for 19 years and now move into their third decade of continuous leadership of the Scottish government – a remarkable outcome given the volatility of UK politics.

Despite the SNP falling back a little, the Parliament now has the largest majority supporting independence in the devolution era. This is despite the process of devolution and the electoral system being deliberately intended by the once-dominant British Labour Party to prevent independence.

While the right wing anti-immigrant party Reform UK has emerged as a significant force in Scotland for the first time, their gains in seats were entirely at the expense of the discredited rightward-moving Conservative & Unionist party [**4**], with the combined Reform UK and Conservative seat numbers being less than those held by the Conservatives alone in the last Parliament. Reform failed to win a constituency seat and had to rely on the regional list "top up" seats in the "two votes" electoral system.

The election was a disaster for the Labour Party [**5**] which had high hopes two years ago of emerging as the largest party, but they lost seats and fell to their lowest representation in the devolution era.

The big gainers were the left-wing Scottish Green Party [**6**], who nearly doubled their seats despite being ignominiously bundled out of a joint governmental agreement with the SNP in

the last parliament. The Scottish Greens won two constituency seats from the SNP for the first time in the largest cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh and won representation from all regions of Scotland. The small centre-right anti-independence Liberal Democrat party also grew but is still the smallest party in the parliament.

The SNP will continue to take the role of First Minister and nominate Government ministers as a minority, negotiating with other parties to get their legislation through. One policy of the newly re-elected government will be to demand another independence referendum from the UK Parliament at Westminster. This is very unlikely to be granted by the Starmer UK government majority, leading to a continuing "democratic deficit". However the SNP will be strongly encouraged by the victory of Plaid Cymru [**7**] in Cymru/Wales to take control of government there and role of First Minister. The SNP are also working with Sinn Fein in the north of Ireland, once taboo due to Sinn Fein's past and unionist sentiment in Scotland, but now becoming normal.

All three First Ministers and leading parties in the devolved legislatures of the UK state now support the break up and creation of separate states. The "Celtic Alliance" of the three First Ministers and parties, as it is increasingly called, will put significant pressure on the unionist forces in England. [**8**]

Similarities and differentiation across Britain

The separate elections took place across Britain on 7 May have provoked a crisis in the UK government of Prime Minister Keir Starmer that could see him ousted from power after only 22 months within days rather than weeks.

It is important to understand that although synchronous, the elections were to different bodies in different parts of the state in England, Scotland and Cymru/Wales, and even under

totally different electoral systems and electorates. Unlike the Westminster Parliament, both Scotland and Cymru/Wales use systems for their national-devolved legislatures that are more proportional and give votes to 16/17 year olds. The electorate in Scotland includes all nationalities, the only part of the UK state where all immigrants are enfranchised.

But the common features across the UK state were a massive collapse in votes for the Labour Party compared to the UK general election in 2024, a continuing rise in support for the right wing Reform party of Nigel Farage, emerging from the Brexit Party, and a rising challenge to the Labour Party by parties setting out policies to the left of Labour or posing a radical challenge to the UK state union.

However these challenges to Labour were differentiated across different parts of the UK state – in England from the Green Party of England & Wales (GPEW) winning 5 councils and hundreds of councillors, in Scotland from the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the left wing Scottish Green Party (SGP) in Parliament, and, most dramatically, in Cymru/Wales from the left social democratic/nationalist Plaid Cymru that replaced a century of Labour domination and their 27 year uninterrupted leadership in the devolved legislature, Senedd Cymru.

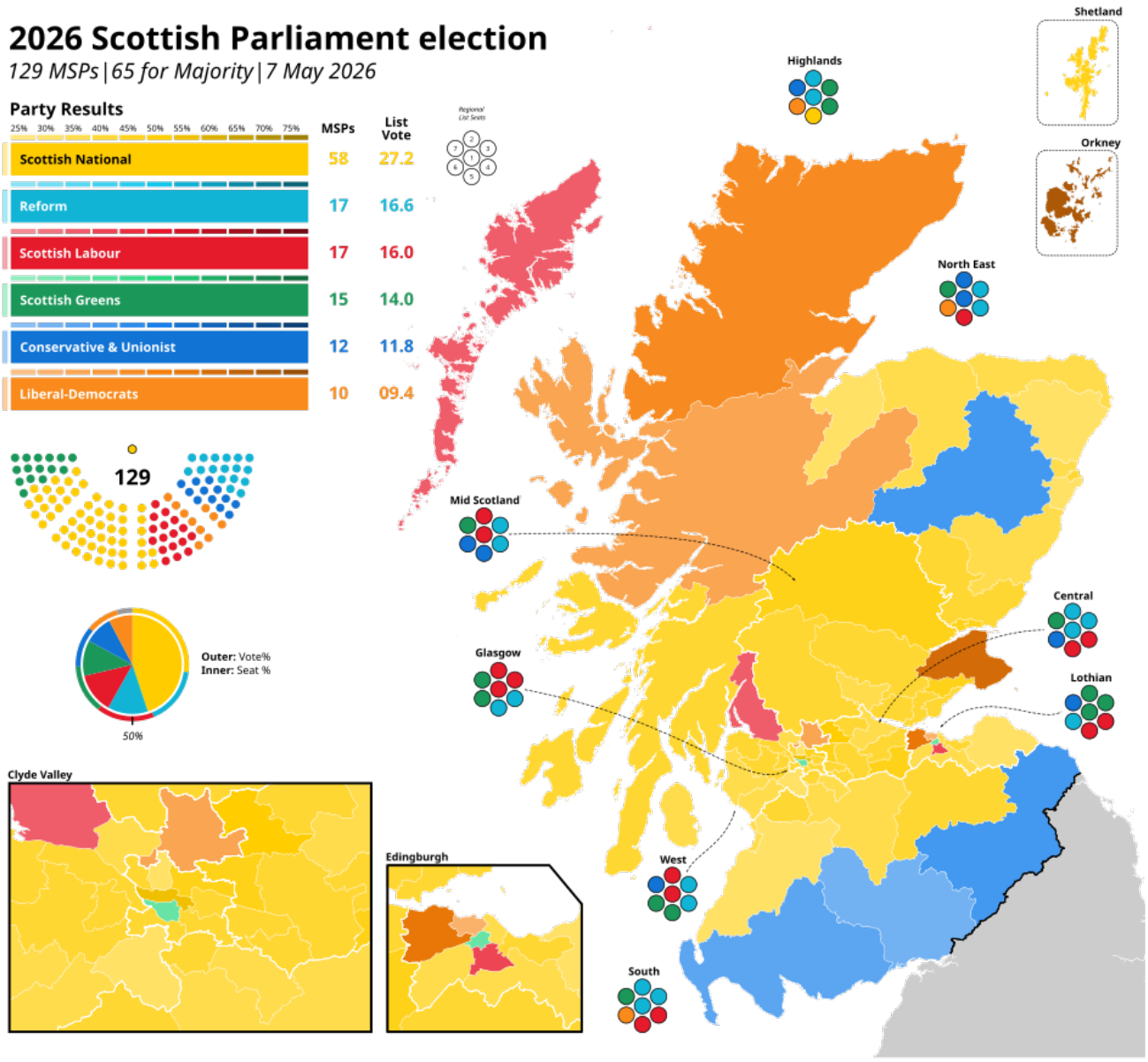
There were no elections in the part of the north of Ireland occupied by the UK state, where Sinn Fein, the former political wing of the IRA, have emerged as the largest party in elections in recent year, reinforcing the fractures within the UK state on national lines. Elections will however take place for the Northern Ireland Assembly and local councils there under a more proportional system (Single Transferable Vote – STV) in May 2027 and for all the local councils in Scotland and Cymru/Wales, as well as for some councils in England. Scotland also uses the STV election system for council elections, while Cymru/Wales and England still use the less representative ’first past the post’ system for local

councils.

A further fracturing and crisis of the political system into multi-party, multi-national politics in the 2027 elections and the multiple by-elections anticipated is likely to put pressure on the UK government, whoever is at the helm by then.

The results

Scottish Parliament Election results in seats (previous results in brackets from 2021)
Party Seats Vote Share Constituency / List (figures in brackets 2021 election)
SNP 58 seats (64), 38% (47%) / 27% (40%)
Labour 17 seats (22), 19% (22%) / 16% (18%)
Reform UK 17 seats (-), 16% (-) / 17% (-)
Scottish Greens 15 seats (8), 2% (1%) / 14% (8%)
Conservative 12 seats (31), 12% (22%) /12% (24%)
Liberal Democrat 10 seats (4), 11% (7%) / 9% (5%)



Unlike the UK Parliament, the Scottish Parliament is elected under an Additional Member System that resembles that used in Germany, where voters have two votes: one for a traditional 'first past the post' constituency candidate and one for a party list top-up regional election that brings a stronger element of proportionality than the winner-takes-all Westminster system.

The SNP won the lion's share of the constituencies taking 57 out of 73 seats, largely due to a significantly divided opposition. The SNP constituency vote however declined by 9.5% percentage points to 38.2% from the last election in 2021. Due to its domination of the constituencies, in the regional party list elections the SNP only took 1 list seat, with many SNP

voters switching to other parties, particularly the Scottish Greens. But the net effect was to give the SNP a clear large lead over other parties, but short of a majority. The SNP have led a minority government on 3 of the last 4 occasions since 2007, only winning a narrow and supposedly impossible majority in a somewhat ’freak’ election result in 2011 that has yet to be replicated.

While Reform UK took 17 list seats and entered the parliament for the first time as joint largest party, this was entirely at the expense of the collapsing Tory vote. The Tories were originally a more liberal party in the Scottish Parliament, even supporting SNP budgets and advocating increased spending commitments while presenting a pro-LGBTQI image, but the process of Brexit transformed the situation and the Tories in Scotland followed their party at Westminster in moving rapidly rightwards and embracing anti-immigrant sentiment. However the Tories lost much support to the more media-savvy, more right wing populism of Nigel Farage’s Reform UK, particularly given the relentless promotion of Farage and scare-mongering against immigrants in the London-based media that Scottish unionism looks to.

The entry of the 17 members of Reform UK of a populist far right anti-migrant party into the national parliament will have a significant effect on Scottish politics. Reform UK have promoted far-right street protests against asylum seekers. Reform UK are opposed to efforts to stop climate change through development of sustainable energy. They will aim to move politics to the right. Yet, most Scots realise migration is needed to tackle an aging population and populate jobs in the economy and public services. North Sea oil and gas is nearly exhausted and due to its large land mass, Scotland is well placed to expand wind, wave and hydro sources of cleaner energy. The SNP have declared they will attempt to isolate Reform UK MSPs. Overall the combined right wing anti-immigrant parties have less seats than the previous parliament and there

is a big 10 percentage points difference in electoral performance of Reform UK in Scotland than England.

The Scottish Greens were criticised from their left for standing in only six constituencies and concentrating on the list vote. The Scottish Greens are a decentralised party however, and decisions about where to stand were made in local branches. Against all the odds, the Scottish Greens took two constituencies/direct mandates, defeating two SNP ministers, and topped the list poll in five constituency areas in Glasgow and Edinburgh. Across the Glasgow region as a whole the Greens exceeded 20%, beating Labour and coming a narrow second to the SNP in what was previously regarded as Labour heartland (Labour ran Glasgow council for over 40 years from the 1970s and won all 7 Westminster seats in 2024).

The left of the left

Outside of the Greens, Labour and SNP, the left challenge completely floundered. The Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) contested the list vote in all eight regions in its own name for the first time since 2011, but its vote was minuscule (only 0.37%). The SSP was a significant force in the early days of the parliament, winning 6 seats in 2003 election and over 10% in Glasgow region. The SSP included most of the left groups to the left of Labour/SNP, but split badly over the leadership of its maverick biggest personality Tommy Sheridan, and has diminished to a small group of highly committed activists with a lost direction. Sheridan tried to reinvent his career by standing for a motley cobbled-together ’independence’ coalition arising from the ruins of the former Alba Party formed by former SNP leader Alex Salmond. Alba had turned to transphobia and the right, and has since collapsed. The Sheridan coalition also won less than 1% of the vote wherever it stood, as did the few candidacies by the George Galloway’s Workers Party and the remnants of the Militant Tendency/CWI and the Communist Party.

Despite an enthusiastic response and big conferences, the new party launched by former Labour MPs Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana has totally collapsed in Scotland and did not stand or support any candidates. Named ’Your Party Scotland’, the 300 strong conference in Dundee in February decided to form a separate but linked Scottish Party, to support Scottish independence and to contest the elections. A sizeable contingent including three councillors from the Scottish Green Party in Glasgow had joined Your Party Scotland, alongside a wide range of other left wingers who reflected the consensus by the vast majority of the radical left to support independence. But these moves to a new Scottish party were blocked by the England based clique around Corbyn supporters, despite claims to respect ’autonomy of nations’. This finally collapsed in April when it became clear candidates would not be permitted to stand and that a unitary party with the Scottish members constituting a ’branch office’, reflecting UK Labour practice, was inevitable. All the leading members of Your Party Scotland resigned, declaring it a failure, and are now engaged in a process around developing a new initiative.

The challenge ahead

In many respects the election campaign was dull. Despite their claims of being progressive, the SNP promised an element of continuity with little in the way of new thinking around tired and struggling public services. Their one radical policy – price controls over basic goods – was treated as undeliverable by the media. UK Labour threw massive spending on advertising, focussed on a presidential style campaign for their leader, Anas Sarwar, much of it funded by commercial interests and Labour supporters in England. Yet Labour failed due to the massive disillusionment among those who had voted Labour in 2024 to rid the UK government of the 14 year reign of Tories. While independence is a major cleavage in Scottish population, it’s mainly the Tories who raise it , unsuccessfully for them, as an electoral issue. Similarly with Brexit. The climate and

ecological crisis was not a major feature – the main issue was the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and the failure of the UK government to tackle it.

The general feeling of voters was summed up in the old Scots language word “scunnered”, meaning discontented and bored. Turnout was down ten points on the previous election to 53% – it had previously been higher than UK Westminster elections, though the electorate for Scottish Parliament elections is significantly larger due to the more inclusive electorate. The Greens tried to develop alternatives, for example by promoting an immediate policy of free bus fares to tackle both climate and poverty and having previously championed (and won) free bus travel for those under 22. But both the SNP and Greens present cautious social democratic incrementalism rather than radical change. It is Reform who are presented as the disruptors and their support mainly comes from a minority of disillusioned working class former Tory and Labour voters looking for scapegoats in the crisis.

Despite winning its largest ever Scottish Parliament majority, the movement for independence remains stalled. The Westminster UK parliament veto over a second independence referendum, established by the UK Supreme Court in 2023, remains in place. The focus on the day-to-day cost of living pressures makes it unlikely a successful mass movement for rupture will re-emerge in the short term, though the constitutional divide remains a significant cleavage, demonstrations regularly occur and polls put support for independence at 50-55%, rising to 60% if Reform UK came to power at the next Westminster election. The broader coalition against the union state is given a boost by the victory of Plaid Cymru and the liaison with Sinn Fein, though all three parties adopt constitutional gradualism and compromise with capital, relying on changing generations rather than mass mobilisation and rupture.

The SNP did put forward a radical policy in their manifesto – price controls over basic goods by the end of the year in the

face of rapidly rising inflation due to war and trade. The Scottish Greens may pressure the SNP to make that policy more meaningful for a working class bearing the brunt of an economic crisis. The trade unions, increasingly disentangled from their Labour Party heritage, may support mobilisations and increase defensive actions including strikes. However, the powers of the Scottish Parliament to impose widespread price controls may be limited by the UK government using a post-Brexit Tory law over the UK internal market and their powers over fuel pricing and taxes. A confrontation over the right of the Scottish Parliament to take such measures is possible.

Whatever happens in the crisis of Labour at Westminster and the threat of a Reform victory in the UK government, there are some positives in Scotland in building a fightback.

Mike Picken, 14 May 2026

[1] Graphic: Par Talleyrand6 – File:2026 Scottish Parliament Election Map.svg, CC BY 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=191646626

[2] The Scottish Parliament covers a population of over 5 million and has very significant legal and constitutional role and a large annual budget of around £60 billion sterling and including some taxation measure, control over many public services like health, education, transport, aspects of social security benefits, local government, police, courts and prisons.

Importantly the UK government retains control over oil and gas industries in the North Sea and the energy infrastructure, though the Scottish government are able to use devolved planning powers to oppose fracking and the construction of new nuclear power stations, and to promote renewable options particularly wind farms. The Scottish government has deviated significantly from some UK state policies, for example

abolishing university tuition fee and health prescription charges, adopting more progressive income tax measures, not breaking hospitals and schools into semi-independent “trusts”, and expanding social security benefits targeted at the poorest.

[3] The Scottish National Party, normally abbreviated to SNP, was formed in the 1930s combining a conservative layer with radical middle class support for Scottish identity. In the late 1960s and early 1970s it emerged as a significant electoral force and declared it was in the “mainstream of European social democracy” though without the formal links to the trade union bureaucracy enjoyed by Labour and most social democratic parties. It first became the largest party in the Scottish Parliament in 2007 and in 2011 won a “freak” majority of seats that resulted in the independence referendum of 2014. While losing the referendum, the SNP emerged as the strongest electoral force with a mass membership five times that of Labour, but it fell back in the UK general election of 2024 and was widely presumed to being on its way to being replaced by Labour as largest party.

[4] The Conservative party in Scotland organises under the formal title of “Scottish Conservative & Unionist Party” but is also widely known as “Tory” or “the Tories”. It was originally a separate party but merged with the Conservatives in England & Wales in the 1960s. The “Unionist” label in its title originally referred to opposition to Home Rule in Ireland and many of the party’s supporters had strong links with the unionist/loyalist block in the north of Ireland, including the sectarian protestant-supremacist Orange Order dedicated to preserving Protestantism within the UK state. The party has not won an election in Scotland since 1955, but became the second party in the Scottish Parliament in 2016. In recent years it has collapsed and many of its activists and voters have defected to the newly established and more rightwing Reform UK of Nigel Farage. However, both parties

support Brexit, the UK leaving the EU, which is very unpopular in Scotland where support for EU membership runs at over 75%.

[5] The Scottish Labour Party was established by Keir Hardie in the 1880s, predating the Britain-wide Labour Party and supported “Home Rule” within the UK state – most domestic policies being controlled by national parliaments with only defence and foreign policy being coordinated at UK level. However it has now become a fully fledged unionist party and its opposition to independence and alignment with Tories in a “Better Together” campaign in 2014, led to a mass exodus of voters and members to the SNP. Its central strategy to head off independence moves from the UK state in the 1990s was to create significant “devolution” though keeping many powers at the level of the UK state. While it has some elements of a notional “autonomy” within the British Labour Party, under its current leadership of Anas Sarwar it had aligned itself with the leadership of Keir Starmer in London winning 37 out of 57 Westminster seats in the UK general election in 2024 mostly from the SNP. Following its electoral collapse in 2026 and plummeting support for Starmer across the UK, there are some marginal voices calling for it to become an independent party.

[6] The Scottish Green Party [SGP] was formed in 1990 and is entirely independent from the Green Party of England & Wales/Plaid Werydd and the Irish Green Party which operate elsewhere in the UK state. It sits on the left of Green Parties internationally and long supported Scottish independence. It has formally adopted “ecosocialism” as its ideology and increasingly uses that term to describe its politics. It is opposed to membership of the NATO alliance but supports Scottish membership of the EU when it becomes independent. It has supported the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign in Scotland and endorses Ukraine’s right to defend itself against Russia’s aggression rejecting pacifist pressures. It is strongly anti-monarchy. It entered into a governmental agreement with the SNP in the Scottish Parliament in 2022,

taking two ministerial roles in the government, but its support for trans rights and opposition to an abandonment of climate targets by the SNP generated tension between the SNP and SGP and it was unceremoniously bundled out of the government by the SNP. For many Green activists the SGP was too uncritical of the SNP, and a new leadership was elected in 2025 that takes a slightly more critical tone. Other parties argue the SGP is just a satellite of the SNP. The SGP broke off relations with the Green Party in England over disputes about trans rights and recognition of devolution, but following the election of Zack Polanski as leader in England and his advocacy of Scottish and Cymru/Wales independence, there has been a convergence and closer working.

[7] Plaid Cymru "Party of Wales" was established in the 1920s and was heavily involved in the revival of Cymraeg/Welsh Language in the 1960s, though remained only a minor or fringe party confined to Cymraeg speaking areas until recently. It has long had informal relations with SNP though it does also define itself as a party of "decentralised socialism'" rather than nationalism per se.

[8] This Alliance includes the North of Ireland in which no elections were held this year. Stormont, the devolved Assembly, will be re-elected next year.

From the Ground Up: The Leith Model and the Future of Your Party Organising

How Edinburgh activists are building a new kind of left politics through community roots, worker solidarity, and

ecosocialist campaigning

Duncan Chapel, January 2026

Something is stirring in Leith. While much of the post-Corbyn left remains trapped in cycles of faction fights and social media outrage, a small group of Your Party activists in Edinburgh's historic port district have been quietly developing an approach to organising that deserves wider attention.

They call it the Leith Model. It's not a grand theory. It's a practical template for building political presence through three interconnected commitments: worker solidarity, community defence, and anti-fascist mobilisation. And it's already generating results that other branches across Scotland might learn from.

The Core Commitments

When Your Party Leith held its founding meeting in late 2025, around twelve committed members agreed on three core areas of action. The list is instructive for what it includes and what it refuses to defer.

Worker solidarity came first. This wasn't abstract commitment to "the working class" but concrete presence on picket lines. When workers at Rockstar Games Edinburgh began organising with the IWGB Game Workers union, facing what the union describes as "Amazon-style" union busting, Leith activists were there. The dispute, which saw 31 workers summarily dismissed in October 2025 just one week after the union reached the statutory recognition threshold, has become a defining struggle for creative industry unionisation in Scotland. Your Party members have maintained visible solidarity throughout: attending protests outside the Holyrood Road headquarters, joining the march to the Scottish Parliament, and connecting the dispute to wider questions about precarious work in the digital economy.

Community defence meant partnership, not substitution. Leith already has Living Rent, the tenants' union that has won real victories on rent controls and retrofit debt. Rather than competing or duplicating, Your Party activists joined existing campaigns. When Marionville fire station faced closure, they worked alongside Living Rent to oppose it. The principle is clear: we're not here to replace the brilliant work being done by community groups; we're here to amplify it.

Standing against racism required physical presence. When fascists terrorised refugees at a hotel in Falkirk, Leith members travelled to stand on the counter-demonstration. One organiser describes the surreal experience of dancing to Spice Girls while bottles and flares flew. "That was really restorative for me," he told a recent branch meeting. Anti-fascism isn't a position statement; it's showing up.

Mutual Aid as Foundation

Alongside these three commitments, practical solidarity has anchored the branch's community presence. The "Keep Leith Warm" initiative before Christmas 2025 brought together food, clothing, and toys for residents facing hardship. Activists leafleted the Kirkgate, inviting people directly: come along, you're hungry, we'll feed you; you need clothes, they're yours.

One organiser, a former Labour member of nineteen years, reflected: "Never had I done something like that, where I was going out and saying, hey, come along next week." The contrast with Labour's hollowed-out electoralism could not be sharper. Mothers left with arms full of toys. Relationships were built that no canvassing database can capture.

The methodological insight matters. As the Leith Model document puts it: "Digital tools support communication, but face-to-face organising remains the core of community mobilisation." WhatsApp groups and social media pages are

useful for outreach. But lasting momentum came when organisers prioritised street stalls, leafleting, and open meetings.

The Freeport Campaign: Ecosocialism in Practice

The most strategically significant development is the emerging campaign against the Forth Green Freeport. This is where ecosocialist politics meets concrete local struggle.

The Freeport, designated in June 2024, stretches across the Forth estuary: Leith, Burntisland, Rosyth, Grangemouth, Edinburgh Airport. It promises 34,500 jobs and billions in investment. It delivers tax breaks for corporations, regulatory "flexibilities" that weaken planning oversight, and a "green" label that environmental groups call straightforward greenwashing.

Living Rent has already identified the housing angle: thousands of projected jobs without housing means rent increases for existing residents. They're pushing the Council to direct Visitor Levy revenue toward social housing rather than unaffordable "mid-market rent" schemes.

Your Party Leith is developing a broader campaign: researching potential impacts on communities and labour standards, building a coalition to resist, preparing a conference motion, planning public demonstrations with affected communities. The Freeport connects deregulation, weakened worker protections, and false climate solutions in a single site of struggle. It's exactly the kind of material issue that can ground anti-capitalist politics in everyday concerns.

The STUC has a representative on the Freeport Governance Board but warns that without enforceable collective bargaining guarantees, the model risks "a race to the bottom" in labour standards. At Grangemouth, the Petroineos refinery closed in April 2025 with 400 job losses. The promised "low carbon manufacturing hub" won't arrive until 2040. That's fifteen

years of managed decline dressed as green transition.

An ecosocialist response demands more than opposition. It requires an alternative vision: public ownership of the Forth estuary's infrastructure, a genuine just transition for fossil fuel workers, democratic control over economic development. Your Party organisers in Leith are beginning to articulate exactly this.

Replication Across Edinburgh

The Leith Model is already spreading. At a recent Edinburgh branch meeting, constituency groups reported back on their emerging plans.

Edinburgh South identified local health campaigns linking lung conditions to air pollution, connecting individual illness to environmental crisis. They mapped their territory honestly: working-class areas in Oxgangs and Liberton/Gilmerton separated by more affluent Morningside. They're planning stalls at the library, the square, the Aldi: places where people actually gather.

Edinburgh Central drew on members' experience of Labour canvassing to articulate what they want to avoid: "instrumental and extractive" data harvesting without genuine conversation. They noted that young people have nowhere free to exist, nowhere to hang out without paying. A party that can provide space, literally, builds roots.

Edinburgh Western focused on visibility: mapping festivals and farmers markets, preparing leaflets for community noticeboards, "free advertising" that establishes presence. They're thinking about how to respond to Reform talking points with positive class politics rather than defensive counter-messaging.

Each constituency is adapting the model to local conditions while maintaining the core commitments. The methodological

suggestion from Leith is worth repeating: ask people “what are your key challenges?” rather than “what do you want to change?” The first elicits concrete grievances organisers can act on. The second produces abstract wish-lists.

What Makes This Different?

The Belgian political theorist Anton Jäger has diagnosed our era as one of “hyperpolitics”: extreme politicisation without political consequences. Politics is everywhere; everyone has opinions; social media buzzes with moral urgency. And nothing changes. The old infrastructure of parties, unions, and civic solidarity has been hollowed out.

The Leith Model offers a modest counter-example. It doesn’t promise revolution. It builds relationships. It shows up on picket lines. It feeds people. It connects struggles that might otherwise remain siloed: the Rockstar workers fighting for union recognition, the tenants organising against rent increases, the communities facing a Freeport that promises jobs but delivers deregulation.

The test will come. Local and national elections will reveal whether community organising translates into electoral presence. The full Rockstar tribunal, likely not until 2027 or 2028, will determine whether the union’s legal claims succeed. The Freeport campaign is only beginning.

But something is being built. Not a social media movement that surges and dissipates. Not an electoral machine that extracts data and disappears between campaigns. A presence. Roots.

How to Get Involved

For Your Party members in Edinburgh, constituency groups are forming now. WhatsApp groups and email lists are being established. The invitation is open.

For activists elsewhere in Scotland, the Leith Model offers a template worth adapting. Map your area: who's already doing good work? Where do people gather? What are the material grievances that could anchor political organising? Partner with existing campaigns rather than duplicating them. Show up on picket lines. Feed people.

The document circulated at the Edinburgh meeting concludes: "This approach offers a tangible blueprint for branch organisation across the four other Westminster constituencies of Edinburgh as well as at ward level."

It could offer a blueprint well beyond Edinburgh. The question is whether we're willing to build it.

Postscript: A Necessary Correction

Since drafting this piece, a comrade with direct knowledge of the Leith branch's activities has offered a sobering corrective. The account deserves honest acknowledgment.

The Rockstar solidarity was a single appearance at an IWGB picket line, uncoordinated with the union, which resulted in organisers asking Your Party to put their banner away. Self-promotion had displaced actual solidarity. The Living Rent "partnership" at Marionville amounted to one petition stall; LR had explicitly asked the branch not to wade in, given their non-partisan stance. We proceeded regardless. And the Freeport campaign remains a discussion group without democratic mandate from the wider branch membership.

The gap between aspiration and execution is the gap between a model and a movement. The Leith document describes an orientation: towards workplace struggle, community defence, anti-fascism, ecosocialist campaigning rooted in material conditions. That orientation remains correct. But turning up uninvited with your banner is not worker solidarity. Ignoring an organisation's request to stay out is not partnership. A WhatsApp group is not a campaign.

The harder lesson: the united front method requires discipline, not enthusiasm. You strengthen existing organisations by actually coordinating with them, by subordinating your party profile to the struggle's needs, by doing the unglamorous work that builds trust over months and years. The impulse to plant flags, to claim credit, to turn every action into recruitment: this is the infantile disorder of a movement still learning to walk.

None of this invalidates the strategic insight. A left party that connects electoral ambitions to community roots, that builds from workplace and neighbourhood struggles rather than parachuting in at election time, that takes ecosocialist campaigning seriously as a material practice: this remains what Your Party Scotland needs. But the Leith Model is, at present, more manifesto than method. The work of translating intention into organisation has barely begun.

DC, 24th January 2026

Duncan Chapel is a member of Your Party in Edinburgh and is the creator of Red Mole Substack. Duncan wishes to thank Richard Parker for his permission to reuse his write-up of the Leith approach

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How Can Socialists Run Cities – will Mamdani show us the

way?

Zohran Mamdani's election to Mayor of New York has been a badly-needed boost to the confidence of the left in the U.S. and beyond. It has also reignited debate about the strategic choices facing socialists elected to local government, and eventually to national governments too. A special, end-of-year issue of *Jacobin*, the U.S. left magazine, was devoted to lessons of municipal socialism, from Red Vienna and Milwaukee's 'sewer socialists' in the first half of the 20th century, to Communist-run cities in Italy or France after the defeat of fascism and Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council in the 1980s, facing off, quite literally across the River Thames, against what was then the far-right, Margaret Thatcher, in government.

These are debates that we, too, need to take seriously, as we seek to build Your Party Scotland as a real, socialist alternative, here in Glasgow and across the country.

One of the most suggestive contributions to the discussion draws on experiences of participatory democracy in Latin America and elsewhere, to argue that as mayor, 'Zohran Needs to Create Popular Assemblies' (*Jacobin* 12.22.2025. https://jacobin.com/2025/12/mamdani-popular-assemblies-democratic-socialism) to build a bottom-up political culture that empowers working people. In this article, Gabriel Hetland, who has done a lot of work with social movements in Venezuela and Bolivia, and Bhaskar Sunkara, the editor of *Jacobin*, point to the positives of governing with such assemblies. In the short term, it enables the social base to keep mobilising, which is vital to sustain a progressive administration that will inevitably be hemmed in by hostile elites and procedural roadblocks, hindering its attempts to implement even its core, immediate, 'affordability' policies. In the process of these fights over housing and transport, childcare and the cost of

groceries, it also begins to create new structures of power, increasing “the capacity of workers to collectively shape the decisions that shape their lives”, and “to lay the basis for a society beyond capitalism”.

Even without the aid of a crystal ball, it is not hard to see how a socialist administration in Glasgow City Council, or even in Holyrood, would confront many of the same obstacles, and need similar solutions, as it sought to seize back the cost-of-living agenda hijacked by Reform in Scotland, or even confront a far-right, Reform government in Westminster.

As Hetland and Sunkara make clear, the key point of assemblies or other forms of mass, participatory democracy, is to change the relationship between the governed and their government, shifting power back to the former. The forms this can take vary greatly. Even within Latin America, the early participatory budgets (PBs) in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in the 1990s and early 2000s – cited here as one of the most successful examples – were very different from the communal councils and communes developed in Venezuela, or the more sporadic assemblies used in Bolivia, a few years later. Although not part of a wider revolutionary process, the scope of the powers in Porto Alegre was in fact much greater.

It would be foolish, from so far away, to pretend to offer much of an opinion on exactly what might work best in New York City. As these authors point out, it is more important to identify the underlying principles. It is these that will determine whether a given form of assembly democracy can effectively change the relations of power, and whether it really can, or even wants to, open up possible paths to a different kind of society.

The problem is that the principles they do identify are quite slight and could lead in a rather different direction. This is not semantic quibbling: the gap between ‘affecting decisions’ and exercising sovereign power is the gap between supplicants

and rulers, between consultation theatre and the embryo of workers' self-government. They are significantly weaker than the four core principles adopted by the founders of Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting. For example, Hetland and Sunkara talk about ordinary people having "real and meaningful opportunities to affect the decisions that shape their lives", and counterpose this to the "participation without influence" that breeds cynicism about many exercises in participation that are merely consultative. This distinction is important, because many later versions of participatory budgeting were indeed consultations without real power. But the original Porto Alegre version was stronger still. Its second and third core principles were that (2) the PB should have *sovereign decision-making power*, and (3) that it should discuss *the whole budget*, not just a sliver of it. This sounds like a lot more than just 'affecting' decisions.

The first of the Porto Alegre core principles was that (1) the PB should be based on *direct, universal participation*. The basic building block was mass, local assemblies, where *all* citizens could take part – there were no delegates at this level of the process, and certainly no algorithms performing random selection or sortition – and where they could debate and decide on the main priorities. An elected PB Council would then work out the nuts and bolts. This partly overlaps with Hetland and Sunkara's second principle, where they talk about creating spaces "to foster meaningful deliberation". As they rightly observe, this "is how non-elites learn to govern themselves", bringing working-class communities together across the divides of race, gender and language that often separate them. This is the essence of collective action, and it upends the isolation and atomisation that underpins most of our capitalist societies.

The fourth Porto Alegre principle was that (4) the PB process should be *self-regulating*. Its shape and procedures, its rules, would not be decided by anyone else or laid down in

legislation by some other body. The assemblies and their elected council would work out the rules and keep changing them along the way as needed. There is at least a potential contradiction between this fundamental autonomy and the third principle our authors suggest for the new Mamdani administration. They talk about the need for a "deliberate design" to avoid the participatory space reproducing inequalities of confidence and political experience, or becoming dominated by existing activists.

These are issues that have drawn attention within our own process of launching Your Party. Certainly, most would agree on the importance of taking steps to make political spaces – in this case the assemblies of participatory democracy – as accessible as possible, in relation to physical accessibility, child care, procedures, language, tone and so on. The problem is that these needs have also been used to justify a 'deliberate design' drawn up somewhere else according to criteria decided by no-one quite knows who. And this in turn raises suspicions of algorithms shaping representative samples, sortition and digital plebiscites. Such instruments, whose roots lie more in marketing and management studies, tend to reproduce the prevailing isolation of individuals, rather than foster the kinds of collective action that alone can begin to reverse the relations of power.

It is worth remembering that most of the core group that 'invented' the Porto Alegre experience saw themselves as revolutionary socialists. They were members of the *Democracia Socialista* current in the Workers Party (PT), which was then the Brazilian section of the Fourth International. When they suddenly found themselves at the head of the city hall administration in a medium-sized state capital, they asked themselves how they could use this to move towards a revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist state. And the first experience they turned to for possible inspiration was the Paris Commune.

Their conception of the participatory budget, and more broadly of direct, assembly-based democracy, was developed with this in mind. As a co-thinker of theirs in France, Catherine Samary, later put it, participatory democracy can be revolutionary if it permanently challenges the existing structures of the bourgeois state. If it ceases to challenge them, if it merely complements or 'extends' the processes of existing representative democracy, it becomes merely reformist and can easily be co-opted as a block to radical change and in effect a prop for the status quo.

Anyone who has endured a local council's 'community engagement' session already knows where this leads: sticky notes on flip charts, facilitators with lanyards, and outcomes decided months ago by officers now nodding gravely at your contributions. That is why, not long after the successes of the early, radical participatory budget in Porto Alegre, the World Bank was soon promoting a watered-down, consultative version as a pillar of 'good governance' in the Global South. Although the situation in New York today may be very different, similar dilemmas, and dangers, are likely face any attempts by the new mayor to open up popular assemblies and spaces for participatory democracy. We should pay close attention because, with a bit of luck, we might later have to deal with parallel problems here in Glasgow.

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Review – Great John Maclean Has Come Home to the Clyde by Donald Robertson

It is just over a hundred years since the death of Scotland's best-known revolutionary Marxist, John Maclean. In the intervening century, Maclean's standing and reputation has waxed and waned, often reflecting the prominence of the national question in Scotland, an issue with which Maclean is understandably – if sometimes one-sidedly – identified. Over the years, there have been a number of important biographies of Maclean; most notably perhaps, that of his daughter, Nan Milton, in 1973, and, more recently, a well-received account of Maclean's life and politics by Henry Bell which came out in 2018. In addition, there have been numerous smaller studies of Maclean, highlighting, for example, the influence of Irish Republicanism on the evolution of Maclean's politics, his attitude to the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and his advocacy of Scottish Republicanism (and flirtation with 'Celtic Communism'). Decades after his premature death – accelerated by the brutality he experienced during his frequent imprisonments for antiwar agitation – Maclean's legacy remains complex and contested.

Donald's Robertson's new biography, *Great John Maclean Has Come Home to the Clyde – The Life and Times of Scotland's Greatest Socialist,* is a welcome addition to the literature on Maclean which adds to our understanding of his life and politics in important ways. First it is a substantial work, which not only takes us through the events in Maclean's life, but also outlines the political and social context in a clear and detailed way. Readers unfamiliar with the events in Glasgow in the first decades of the 20th century are treated to an extensive account of 'Red Clydeside' and of the struggles in the community (most notably the Rent Strikes of

1915) and at the point of production (in particular, against 'dilution' and for the 40-hour week) which characterised the period, and in which Maclean played a key role. The main aspects of Maclean's political life are also brought out clearly. His focus on working-class political education, including his long-term project to establish an independent *Labour College for Scotland* and his legendary lectures in Marxist economics, conducted for well over a decade, where *hundreds* of working-class Scots were introduced to the foundational concepts of Marx's *Capital.* Equally, Maclean's phenomenal workload, his appearance at meetings and events throughout Britain, educating, agitating, and organising tirelessly against the bosses and their system, is outlined in detail. Above all, Maclean's internationalism (and international reputation), expressed most powerfully in his courageous opposition to the First World War and in his support for Irish Independence, and for which he paid such an enormous price in terms of his health and personal life, is highlighted.

Largely devoted to directly recounting Maclean's life and times, Robertson's biography avoids the controversies about Maclean which have tended to preoccupy the left (e.g. was Maclean's Scottish Republicanism a pragmatic response to the ebbing of the post-war upsurge or did it represent a prescient grasp of the importance of the national question? Was Maclean's advocacy of a distinct Scottish Communist Party the basis of his hostility to the nascent Communist Party of Great Britain or was it the other way around?). But if the author does not weigh in on these perennial debates, the book does bring out new material on Maclean's life which more than justifies its publication. First, Robertson has made skilful use of the newspaper archives of the time – and particularly that of the 'Glasgow Herald' – which are now available. This allows him to describe in detail the contemporary impact of Maclean, and more specifically detail the trials for sedition and under the 'Defence of the Realm Act' to which he was

repeatedly subjected. The best known quote from Maclean comes from one such trial, his famous 'Speech from the Dock', delivered at the High Court in Edinburgh in May 1918, with its immortal line *"I am not here … as the accused; I am here as the accuser of capitalism dripping with blood from head to foot",* but Robertson's research also sets out the 'evidence' laid against Maclean and highlights the lengths and means by which the authorities attempted to silence him and curb his influence.

Similarly, Robertson's access to the 'National Archives' for the relevant period throws new light on Maclean's significance and just how seriously the establishment took him and the movement he epitomised. In one of the most fascinating sections of the book, Robertson recounts the proceedings of the 'Imperial War Cabinet' held shortly after the armistice of 11th November 1918. The cabinet, which was chaired by Lloyd George, was made of Ministers from the UK, Canada, Australia, and South Africa as well as other leading officials. There were three items on its agenda on the 28th of November 1918; first, was it possible to prosecute the German Kaiser for war crimes? Second, what arrangements should be made to supply food to the war-torn continent? And third, what should be done about John Maclean, currently serving a term of hard labour in Peterhead Prison, and, more specifically, would it be prudent to release him? A debate ensued in which the pros and cons of releasing Maclean were considered. George Barnes, the Labour Party's representative in the War Cabinet, supported his release, highlighting that *"[t]he continued agitation about John Maclean constitutes a serious danger for the government. Mass meetings have been held in many places, including London, and resolutions continue to pour in demanding his release"* while others took the view that he should remain in prison. Of particular concern to the cabinet was the potential impact of releasing Maclean on the political situation in Ireland, and on the continued detention of leading members of Sinn Fein

such as Eamon de Valera. As it happened, the Irish authorities expressed no opposition to Maclean's release, and he was freed on Monday 2nd December. On his return to Glasgow, thousands of his supporters turned out to see him, his subsequent journey through the Glasgow city centre immortalised in Hamish Henderson's famous song "*The John Maclean March*".

Overall, *Great John Maclean Has Come Home to the Clyde* is a thorough and valuable addition to the literature on John Maclean. It reminds us of an important period when 'the Clyde ran Red' and highlights the mass appeal of Maclean's revolutionary message. While there are no easy answers for contemporary socialists in Maclean's story, his emphasis on popular socialist education; on the importance of internationalism and anti-imperialism; on relating to the actual struggles of working class people both in and outwith the workplace; and, finally, his personal example of courage in the face of repression and adversity are all things we can and should learn from. Donald Robertson's new book should certainly help us do this.

Reviewed by Iain Gault, Donald Robertson's *Great John Maclean Has Come Home to the Clyde* is published by Resistance Books and is available here. A collection of Maclean's writings including this *Speech from the Dock* is available from the Marxist Internet Archive here.

Donald Robertson was born in Kinlochleven. He co-founded the Australian music and arts magazine *Roadrunner,* was the first editor of *Countdown* magazine, and is the author of books about rock music. He lives in Sydney and blogs at roadrunnertwice.com.au.