Leonard resigns, as Starmer abandons Scotland's voters

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Richard Leonard has bowed to the inevitable and resigned as Scottish Labour Party leader, just 16 weeks before the most critical Scottish Parliament elections since devolution on 6 May.

The choreographed move coordinated by the office of the UK Labour leader, Keir Starmer, continuing his purge of the Party of any apparent remnants of supporters of Jeremy Corbyn came on 14 January. *Mike Picken* reports from Scotland.

Purge of Corbyn associates

Leonard's departure comes after three years of desultory performance at the helm of Scottish Labour. He was narrowly elected in 2017 as an associate of left wing former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Following Keir Starmer's consolidation as new leader of the Labour Party in April 2020 and the subsequent ongoing purge of Corbyn associates, Leonard was hanging by a thread.

Since his election, Leonard faced repeated opposition from within the 23-strong Labour group of Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs). He fought off one major public attempt to remove him in September 2020, when several MSPs worked through the press to undermine his position. But, having tabled a motion of no confidence, they judged they did not yet have enough support on the Scottish Executive Committee (SEC) and withdrew their motion before the vote. This followed the disqualification of the right-wing controlled Labour Students' organisation representatives across the whole of Labour due to financial misconduct, which unexpectedly reduced the votes of

those supporting “no confidence” on the SEC at the time.

Starmer demands “Get Brexit Done!”

Starmer in London and Leonard’s opponents in Scotland were looking for another opportunity and the apparent public split in December 2020 over the respective votes on Brexit legislation in the UK Parliament in London and Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh made this more urgent.

Starmer, one of the most argumentatively anti-Brexit of Labour MPs under Jeremy Corbyn, is now apparently becoming the strongest Brexit supporter in the Labour Party as leader.

As the Johnson government’s trade negotiations with the EU faltered during the autumn, over the UK’s intransigent opposition to any remaining vestiges of the EU within the rest of the British state (outside the occupied six counties in the north of Ireland which to all intents and purposes remain part of the EU), Starmer forced Labour to adopt the previous 2019 pro-Brexit line of Johnson and N Farage and even shamefully adopted “Get Brexit Done!” as an official campaign slogan.

He tried to force Labour MPs in the Westminster Parliament to vote for Johnson’s miserable eleventh hour Brexit trade deal. Although nearly 40 Labour MPs defied Starmer’s whip, the sole surviving Labour MP in Scotland, Ian Murray, previously an outspoken opponent of Brexit and of Leonard, trooped meekly into the Westminster lobbies with the Tories to give Johnson a massive “hard Brexit” majority.

The Scottish National Party (SNP), which since 2015 has had the vast majority of Westminster MPs from Scotland and is the third largest party in the House of Commons, called instead for continuing opposition to the Brexit deal and an extension of the ‘transition period’ to avoid massive economic dislocation in the middle of the pandemic.

Scots MPs formed the main contingent of those voting against

Johnson's squalid deal at Westminster, reflecting the 62% vote for Remain. Opposition to Brexit is now about 75% according to recent polls in Scotland.

Starmer sees Labour taking a hard line in favour of Brexit as a way to 'win back' the dozens of former Labour seats in northern England lost by Labour in 2019, the so-called 'red wall' that were allegedly lost because of Brexit. In fact many of these seats were lost because of neglect over decades by the Labour Party and the reality is that in taking such a hard line pro-Brexit position, lining up with the Tories, Starmer is definitely consigning Scottish Labour to electoral oblivion in May.

The Scottish Parliament and Government, led by the SNP since 2007, attempted to intervene in the Brexit negotiations particularly over fishing and free movement but was kept out by Johnson Because Brexit significantly affects devolved matters, the Scottish Parliament and the devolved legislatures in Wales and the north of Ireland were asked by the UK government to give a 'legislative consent' to the Westminster bill. Not only did the Scottish parliament overwhelmingly refuse this , so too did the Welsh Senedd, where Labour are the leading party, and the Northern Ireland Assembly in the occupied six counties. This left the Brexit deal as an England-only affair imposed on the population of rest of the British state.

Scottish and Welsh Labour parties had to oppose the Brexit legislation in the devolved parliaments to avoid losing face, while Starmer was pressing Westminster Labour strongly to support it to 'win back the red wall'. A press release issued by Leonard about why Scottish Labour was voting a differently to UK Labour attracted huge controversy making Labour look stupid, and gave Starmer the excuse he was looking for to move openly to ditch him.

Secret meeting organises coup

According to *The Times* and confirmed by a wide range of sources, Starmertold Leonard he had "no confidence" in him. On the evening of Wednesday January 13, Starmer hosted a secret online meeting to which Leonard was not invited, though private millionaire Labour donors and Ian Murray were. A deal brokered by trades unions apparently saw Leonard resign the next day with immediate effect, but guaranteed him a place at the top of one of Scottish Labour's regional lists for the Holyrood elections in May – in apparent contradiction of the Scottish Labour policy of putting women at the head of all lists. This guarantees Leonard one of Scottish Labour's dwindling number of seats in the Scottish Parliament and an MSP's salary of £65k for the next four years.

While Leonard went along with the pretence that this was a personal decision taken over Xmas in his vacuous resignation statement, (link) the shoddy 'deal' produced outrage from Leonard-supporting left wing MSP Neil Findlay who attacked Leonard's opponents as "flinching cowards and sneering traitors" (link) (a reference to the words of the "Red Flag", the longstanding anthem of the Labour Party ritually sung at Labour's conferences but completely ignored by Labour leaders other than Corbyn).

Findlay held explosive interviews including on BBC Scotland's TV News programme The Nine and radio programme Good Morning Scotland attacking Leonard's opponents of Leonard for their manoeuvres. Findlay is an outspoken Corbyn supporter but is standing down from the Scottish Parliament, and the organisation he leads within Scottish Labour, the neo-Stalinist Campaign for Socialism, has been increasingly ineffectual.

While Richard Leonard has been identified by the mainstream press as a Corbyn supporter and this constituted a major reason for his purge, the reality is actually more complex.

Leonard is a fairly committed left social democrat supporting action on workers' rights and environmental issues, genuinely liked by people who work with him, including opponents. But his decades working in the trade union bureaucracy have led to a politically cautious approach, seeking to work through "backroom deals" and attempted careful presentation. This is the very opposite of what was Corbyn and his many supporters in the party represented. In the right wing atmosphere of the Scottish Labour Party, Leonard failed to win support for his equivocal role.

Scottish Labour was the only part of the Labour Party where in 2016 full members failed to vote for Jeremy Corbyn. Leonard only won by a few hundred votes against his opponent a year later, right wing businessman Anas Sarwar. By the time of the election of a deputy leader in 2020, it was clear that the majority of Scottish Labour Party members had moved to the right and the devoted Blair-supporting MSP, Jackie Baillie, easily won nearly 60% of the membership vote against the challenge by left wing Glasgow councillor Matt Kerr. Leonard's base of support was less within the Corbyn supporting minority within the party membership and relied on the financial weight of the affiliated trade unions after decades working as a paid official. And a majority of trade unions in Scotland are not affiliated to Labour.

Leonard also committed a number of major gaffes in his lacklustre appearances in the Scottish Parliament against the more visibly competent First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon of the SNP, running a high profile Covid presence. In interventions over measures to lockdown hospitality during the Covid crisis, he accused the SNP of behaving like temperance leaders by restricting alcohol sales and put forward a bizarre claim of the SNP treating the industry like "Sodom and Gomorrah". Voters were unable to tell whether he was for or against tighter measures to suppress Covid.

Sturgeon easily ran rings round him, even though on many

occasions she said they shared a similar outlook and that she wanted to work with him. In the febrile tribal politics adopted by Scottish Labour, Leonard repeatedly called on the SNP government to undertake things they had already demonstrably done, while his fiscal demands for more expenditure were easily rebuffed by the SNP saying that due to the UK government's treatment of the Scottish government, only independence could achieve what he was demanding. While Labour swung between being for and against Brexit, leaving Scottish voters breathless, they failed to hit home against the SNP's unconditional support for EU policies especially when it came to the SNP using state-aid policies as an excuse for not intervening to defend Scottish workers.

Under Leonard, the Scottish Labour manifesto for the 2019 general election dropped the Scottish party conference's opposition to renewal of the Scottish-based Trident nuclear weapons system, to adopt the UK party policy of spending up to 200 billion pounds upgrading Britain's nuclear weapons of mass destruction. For a long period Scottish public opinion has been strongly against the Trident system and nuclear weapons, but Scottish Labour now backs it.

By the time of Leonard's removal on 14 January, it was clear that the unions could not support him any longer and thus they brokered a backroom deal for him to vacate the leadership while staying in the Parliament.

Dismal electoral performance of Scottish Labour

As well as Brexit and the wish to purge Corbyn supporters, the ostensible reason for Starmer seeking to ditch Leonard was the dismal electoral performance of Scottish Labour. But the collapse of support for Scottish Labour started well before Leonard became leader.

Labour was the dominant party in Scotland over many decades,

regularly sending up to 50 MPs to the Westminster parliament. Labour introduced devolution and the recreation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 (after an earlier attempt in 1979 was defeated by a small "anti devolution" minority of Labour MPs blocking with the Tories to sabotage the democratic process). Labour saw devolution of the highly centralised British state as the opportunity to "see off" the electoral challenge of the independence-supporting SNP. But Labour's own record in government was badly tainted by the Iraq war in 2003 and the pro-austerity policies of the Blair/Brown days – in Scotland this was reflected by major privatisation of public services.

Labour were ousted from the Scottish government (then called "Executive") in 2007, when the SNP overtook them in the more proportional elections for the Parliament. But Labour managed to take the majority of seats in Scotland at Westminster in 2010 because of the undemocratic first-past-the-post electoral system where Scots voted tactically for Labour to keep the Tories out. They assumed voters would just return to them.

By the 2011 Holyrood elections, the SNP were able to use the more proportional system to win an unexpected majority and to press their demands for a referendum on Scottish independence. Then Tory Prime Minister David Cameron eagerly agreed to a referendum in 2012 at a time when independence was showing around 25% in the polls. Labour entered into an alliance with the Tories under the slogan "Better Together" to defend the unionism of the British state. But Scottish voters, particularly working class Labour voters, increasingly saw independence as an alternative to austerity policies of London that had been imposed on Scotland undemocratically. Support for independence soared to 45% in the referendum of 2014.

Although defeated in the referendum, a mass independence movement was mobilised and in 2015 voters wiped out both the Tories and Labour, returning 56 out of 59 SNP MPs to

Westminster. Labour learnt no lessons from this and continued to espouse the Unionist cause, despite the Brexit referendum in 2016 when Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU, opposing the xenophobic campaign against free movement by the Tory and UKIP Brexiteers.

Labour slumped to third place in the Holyrood elections of 2016 and while the SNP went from a majority to a minority government, their vote share actually increased. Labour won back a few Westminster seats in Scotland in the general election of 2017 when Corbyn's left wing programme massively increased Labour's appeal (though only an increase of a few tens of thousands of votes in Scotland, compared to over a million in England), but they lost all these gains in 2019 on the back of an ambiguous policy on Brexit and continuing growth in support for independence. A few Corbyn supporters like John McDonnell held out the possibility of Labour accepting self-determination for Scotland, upholding the right of the Scottish Parliament to determine whether and when to hold a referendum. But this received a hostile reception from the leadership of Scottish Labour and some on the left across the pro-union Labour Party. Scottish Labour also lost control of all its councils in 2017, including the city of Glasgow which it had controlled for over forty years.

Majority for Independence

Throughout the last year opinion polls have repeatedly shown a majority for independence in Scotland – the latest two polls put support at 57-58%. The SNP are showing over 50% support for first-past-the-post seats, giving them the strong likelihood of a majority government in May, committed to a second independence referendum in the near future. Together with the pro-independence Scottish Green Party picking up regional list seats, the next Scottish Parliament looks set to have a clear pro-independence majority – that will be ignored by Boris Johnson's government at Westminster, backed by Labour

leader Starmer.

Starmer made a major speech in January setting out his opposition to a second independence referendum in favour of a campaign for a more radical devolution or federalism policy aiming to prop up the failed British state. Scottish voters have heard all this before – in "the vow" made by Labour and Tory leaders claiming to boost the role of Scottish governance within the UK as a desperate attempt to stop independence voting in 2014. The "vow" was symbolised in the figurehead of 'yesterday's man', former Labour prime minister Gordon Brown, who has now been appointed by Starmer to head up a Labour devolution campaign that has no discernible policies and cannot be delivered without support in England.

The imposition of hard Brexit on Scotland has been the hugely unpopular result of the 'vow' – rejection of Scotland's vote on the EU and ignoring any views of the Scottish government or parliament. Boris Johnson has made clear his views that devolution was a "disaster" and that he intends to continue to ignore Scottish opinion.

Scottish Labour's newly appointed constitutional policy spokesperson, Anas Sarwar, caused consternation within the party when he said Labour would be against any independence referendum being held in "the next five years" – a made-up on-the-hoof policy never adopted by Scottish Labour and standing against the views of the Scottish Trade Union Conference (STUC) and Labour's largest Scottish affiliate Unison, both of which back an independence referendum being solely up to the Scottish Parliament.

Fishing crisis

Hard Brexit has in recent days provoked a huge crisis in the fishing industries – one of Scotland's largest economic areas – as tonnes of Scottish fishing products sit rotting in lorries unable to get to their traditional EU markets. Tory

cabinet member Jacob Rees-Mogg's response that "at least the fish are British and happier", together with the revelation that the Tory fishing minister had not even read the Brexit deal before voting with it because she was "too busy with nativity", has poured fuel on the flames of Scottish opinion as thousands of jobs are threatened by Tory Brexit.

But it is Labour's commitment to working with the Tories and supporting their hated policies that will continue to further its electoral collapse in Scotland – voting for Brexit, supporting nuclear weapons, undemocratically refusing an independence referendum, and unconditional support for the union. Starmer appeared with a union flag behind him on a recent TV broadcast to emphasise this commitment.

As many in Scotland are pointing out – it's the Labour message that's the problem not the messenger!

The contest for Leonard's replacement is unlikely to produce any sparks, as the likes of Anas Sarwar and Jackie Baillie are the frontrunners to compete for the mantle of "Starmer's Champion in Scotland" – or "running the junior branch office" as many in the independence movement put it.

MSP Monica Lennon has been touted as a possible runner due to her recent high profile successful campaign to make Scotland the first country in the world to distribute free sanitary products for women and girls. However, Lennon is among only a few who support separating the Scottish Labour Party from the UK party and had defended the right of the Scottish Parliament to determine an independence referendum. She is therefore unlikely to attract significant support and the Starmer leadership will seek to ensure she fails.

Unless Labour makes a dramatic change of policy on both independence and Brexit, the Scottish party seems set to confine itself further to the margins of politics, whoever emerges as the eleventh leader in twenty years.

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