

**The SNP's new leader: the Queen of Scots - Alex Salmond's unflashy successor could yet outshine him.**

Alex Salmond, Scotland's most famous secessionist, is prone to displays of grandeur. During the campaign for independence over the summer the first minister took to comparing himself to Robert the Bruce, the Scots' leader in their 14th-century wars against the English. However, when the secessionists lost the referendum in September he promptly announced his resignation.

His successor as first minister and leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) is humbler in style.

Nicola Sturgeon's speech at her party's conference in Perth on November 15th lacked the bombast of Mr Salmond's valedictory address the day before. Ms Sturgeon grew up in modest circumstances and owes her smooth rise through the political ranks to judicious alliance building (specifically, a decade-long collaboration with Mr Salmond).

Mr Salmond bequeaths a strikingly upbeat party. Although the secessionists lost September's referendum by 45% to 55%, the SNP has, since then, welcomed pro-independence activists keen to continue the struggle. In under three months its membership has grown from 25,000 to over 85,000 (almost one in 50 Scottish adults is now in the party). One poll of voting intentions by Survation for the Daily Record on November 18th put it on 46%, largely at the expense of the Labour Party. If repeated in next May's general election, that would give the SNP 52 of Scotland's 59 seats in the House of Commons.

Ms Sturgeon, who was sworn in as first minister on November 20th, wants to convert this fleeting surge into lasting power. Her conference speech revealed glimpses of a three-step plan. The first task is to squash her party's social democratic rival, the Labour Party, by shifting to the left. Ms Sturgeon has already moved into Labour territory by pledging to extend free child care, pay government cleaners more and increase spending on health care.

Thus she plans to win enough seats in next year's Westminster election to hold the balance of power in the event of a hung parliament. In her speech in Perth, Ms Sturgeon explained the second pillar of her plan: that she would never support a Conservative-led government. The condition for a deal with Labour, she added, would be the removal of Britain's nuclear deterrent from Scottish waters and the transfer of extensive new powers from London to Edinburgh.

The final part of Ms Sturgeon's plan is to bring about a new referendum on independence. Having ruled out any further vote for a generation after September's plebiscite, in her conference speech she suggested that events-and in particular the risk of England pulling Britain out of the EU could make it essential. At the very least, that gambit increases her bargaining power in ongoing discussions about further devolution to Scotland.

The signs suggest that the first minister could find herself in a position of remarkable power. Next year's general election will probably produce a hung parliament. If Labour is the largest party, it may rely on the SNP. If the Tories lead, the risk of Britain's exit from the EU could trigger a new independence referendum. In either case, the modest Ms Sturgeon might just achieve more in power than the flashy Mr Salmond ever did.

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