



CASE STUDY The ideas and impact of the Scottish National Party (SNP)

The central goal of the SNP has always been independence from the UK, although the party has long been divided between fundamentalists, who wanted to concentrate on the goal of Scottish independence, and the gradualists who paid attention instead to policies such as devolution. Until the 1960s, the SNP was essentially a moderate centrist party. However, it became more clearly left wing, enabling them to make inroads into Labour's support in urban, industrial Scotland.

In 2007, the SNP became the largest party in the Scottish Parliament and formed a minority government with Alex Salmond, the party leader, as First Minister. In 2011, the party formed Scotland's first majority government, paving the way for the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum. Although the 'yes' campaign was defeated by a full 10 percentage points, the SNP, under its new leader, Nicola Sturgeon, emerged dramatically strengthened, buoyed up by a significant decline in Labour's Scottish vote.

In 2016 and 2021 the SNP returned to government in the Scottish Parliament for successive terms, although they ran minority governments, just short of a majority. After Sturgeon resigned in 2023, the chaotic leadership of Hamza Youseff was followed by the calm, if not very dynamic, leadership of John Swinney. Nonetheless with the national Labour government becoming historically unpopular throughout 2025-26, the SNP found themselves the unexpected beneficiary in May 2026 Scottish Parliament elections as still by far the largest party with 58 seats, only 7 short of a majority. While the party won the vast majority of the 59 Scottish seats in Westminster in general elections in 2015, 2017 and 2019, in 2024, following the demise of Nicola Sturgeon and the ensuing financial scandals and leadership turbulence, (See Chapter 7 for case study) the party dropped to only 9 out of 57 seats with Labour winning 37.

The SNP has had a profound impact on UK politics, reshaping the political landscape both within Scotland and across the United Kingdom.

Independence and devolution

- 2011 majority and 2014 Referendum: The SNP's historic majority in the 2011 Scottish Parliament Election gave it the mandate to hold the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum – the first in UK history. Although the 'no' side prevailed (55% to 45%), the campaign fundamentally changed UK constitutional politics, putting the question of Scottish independence at the heart of national debate.
- Devolution and more powers: The 2014 Referendum and subsequent SNP pressure led to more powers for the Scottish Parliament. This resulted in the Scotland Act 2016, significantly expanding devolved powers.

Party politics in Scotland and Westminster

- Collapse of Labour dominance: The SNP's 2011 Holyrood victory, and especially its 2015 Westminster landslide (winning 56 of 59 Scottish seats), ended decades of Labour dominance in Scotland and made the SNP the third-largest party in the UK Parliament.
- Influence in Westminster: As a large Westminster party from 2015–19, the SNP played a pivotal role in debates over Brexit, devolution and acting as a vocal advocate for Scottish interests and progressive policies.
- Brexit opposition: The SNP was a leading voice against Brexit, reflecting Scotland's strong Remain vote in 2016 and criticising the 'democratic deficit' of Scotland being taken out of the EU against its will which was used to reinforce the independence case.



Progressive policies

- **Social policy:** The SNP has implemented progressive policies in Scotland – such as free university tuition and expanded social care – that have influenced debates and policy choices in other parts of the UK. (See Devolution Chapter 7 for detail.)

Decline and revival

- The passage of the Gender Recognition Reform Bill in December 2022, which aimed to make it easier for trans people to change their legally recognised sex, sparked intense political and public division in Scotland. It resulted in a Section 35 order by Prime Minister Sunak to block the bill, citing concerns it would conflict with UK-wide equality laws and impact single-sex spaces and protections. This was the first time such a veto had been used, escalating constitutional tensions and putting Sturgeon's Government in direct conflict with Westminster. The bill's unpopularity was reflected in opinion polls, and the controversy deepened with high-profile cases such as the Isla Bryson transgender prisoner row, which brought national attention and criticism to Sturgeon's handling of the issue. Her championing of the bill cost her support both within her party and among the wider public.
- **Leadership crises:** Sturgeon resigned surprisingly in 2023, citing exhaustion, personal reflection and the need for fresh leadership. However, the subsequent arrest of Sturgeon's husband (and SNP chief executive) Peter Murrell over the allegedly fraudulent use of £600,000 cast a shadow over her resignation. Subsequently, the SNP faced major leadership turmoil, internal divisions and electoral setbacks. Successive leaders, including Humza Yousaf and John Swinney, struggled to unite the party amid disagreements over independence strategy and social issues like gender reform. Ongoing financial scandals eroded public trust in the party, and the party's failure to present a clear vision has led to significant losses in the 2024 General Election where the SNP crashed from 48 MPs to just 9, while Labour took 37 of Scotland's 57 seats and re-established itself as the main Scottish voice at Westminster.
- Despite the 2024 Westminster collapse, the SNP remains the largest party in the Scottish Parliament and continues to advocate independence within a broadly left-wing policy platform. In the 2026 Scottish Parliament election, the SNP triumphed again winning 58 seats, 7 short of a majority, on a combined vote share of 33% which is significantly less than the 49.6% of 2021.