

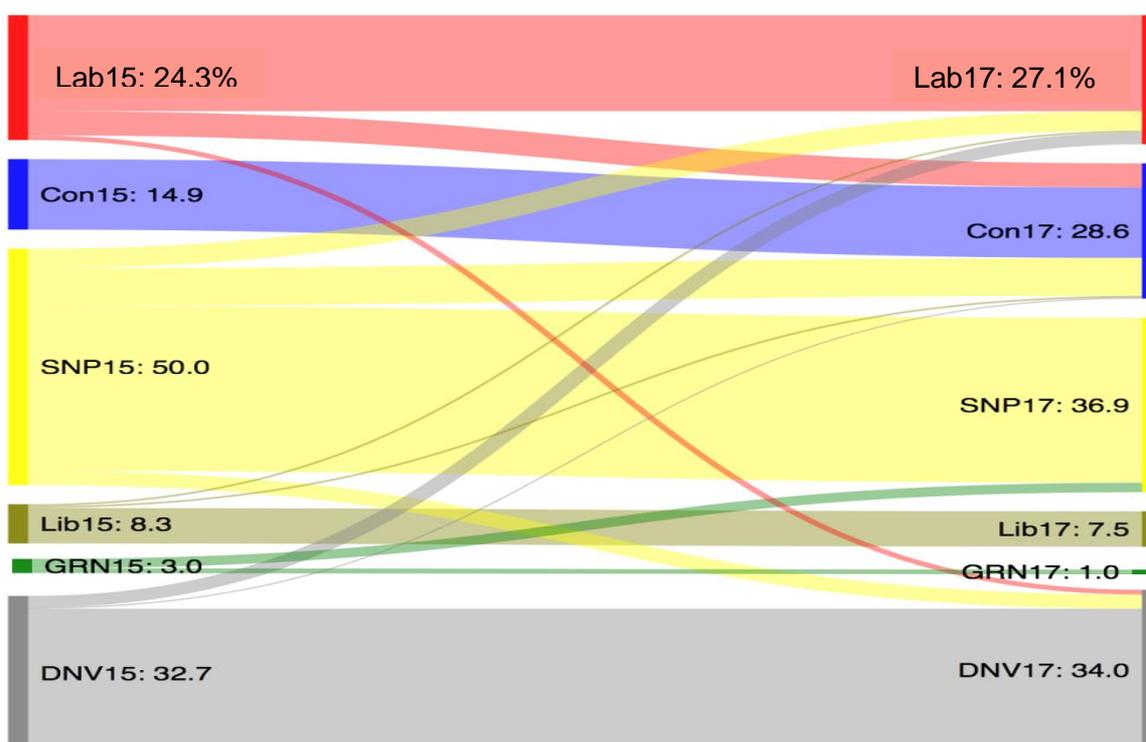
Labour in Scotland

In 2015, Labour was all but wiped out as a political force in Scotland, retaining only one seat and losing forty. However, only two years later, we defied expectations by increasing our tally of seats by six – and with 22 marginal seats being located in Scotland, winning there is a key step in Labour’s path to a majority government.

While it is welcome that we are in an improved position after a devastating defeat only three years ago, it is too early to claim that the tide is turning for Labour in Scotland. Such a rapid turnaround suggests a volatile Scottish electorate, and it is sobering to note that our vote share increased by 2.8%, amounting to a mere 9,860 more votes than our 2015 nadir.¹

When the small scale of the swing towards Labour is considered alongside the nature of voter defection and recent polling, significant concerns emerge about whether this change in our electoral fortunes will last. The following analysis is based on polling, conversations with activists in Scotland, and focus groups conducted in July 2018 with voters who had switched from Labour to either Conservative or SNP since 2010.

Where voters went in 2017



Given that Labour's share of the vote did not increase substantially in 2017, what explains our apparent resurgence north of the border?

In some respects, this is more a story of what happened to the SNP: they held on to 55% of their voters from the last election, with half of the voters they lost switching to other parties (with one in six from 2015 switching to Labour), and the other half choosing not to vote, turning a number of seemingly safe seats into three-way marginals.³ While Labour benefitted from poorer turnout among SNP voters and a number of switchers, we also struggled to retain some of our support from 2015: notably, we lost one in four 2015 Labour voters to the Tories, which had a discernible effect on our performance.⁴ Scottish PPCs from 2017 have attested to the fact that voters in former Labour strongholds are switching to the Tories in sizeable numbers, which led to some seats being lost by a narrow margin, including Glasgow East, Glasgow South West and Inverclyde.⁵ Nonetheless, Labour did manage to attract a number of Tory and Lib Dems switchers, somewhat offsetting these losses.⁶

With regard to voting behaviour by age, similar trends can be observed in both Scotland and England. Labour managed to increase its share of the vote amongst under 45s, while losing ground with the over 45s; something Sir John Curtice has described as "a mild version of the pro-Corbyn 'youthquake' that was in evidence in England and Wales."⁷ This has implications for both the durability of this coalition of voters, and our policy platform in Scotland, given the voting behaviour and political preferences of these demographics: old voters who are drifting from us are more likely to vote, oppose independence and to have supported Brexit, while younger voters are less loyal to political parties, more supportive of a second referendum on independence in the near future, and mostly against Brexit.⁸

These three separate trends: the collapse in the SNP vote, Labour's improved performance among younger voters at the expense of older ones, and the number of Labour voters switching to the Tories, overlap not only with each other but with the debates that have dominated Scottish politics over the last decade or so. These issues must therefore be considered in detail in order to attain a fuller understanding of our 2017 performance in Scotland, and how we map a way forward for the party.

Scottish Independence and Brexit

Four years on from the referendum on Scottish independence, and there is no escaping the extent to which this event and its fallout have reshaped the country's political landscape.

We already know from 2015 that our decision to campaign alongside the Tories during the independence referendum campaign, when coupled with a growing perception that the party had lost its way, created a perfect storm which led to our electoral wipe-out. The question today is the extent to which these perceptions continue to exist and will shape attitudes towards the Labour party in years to come.

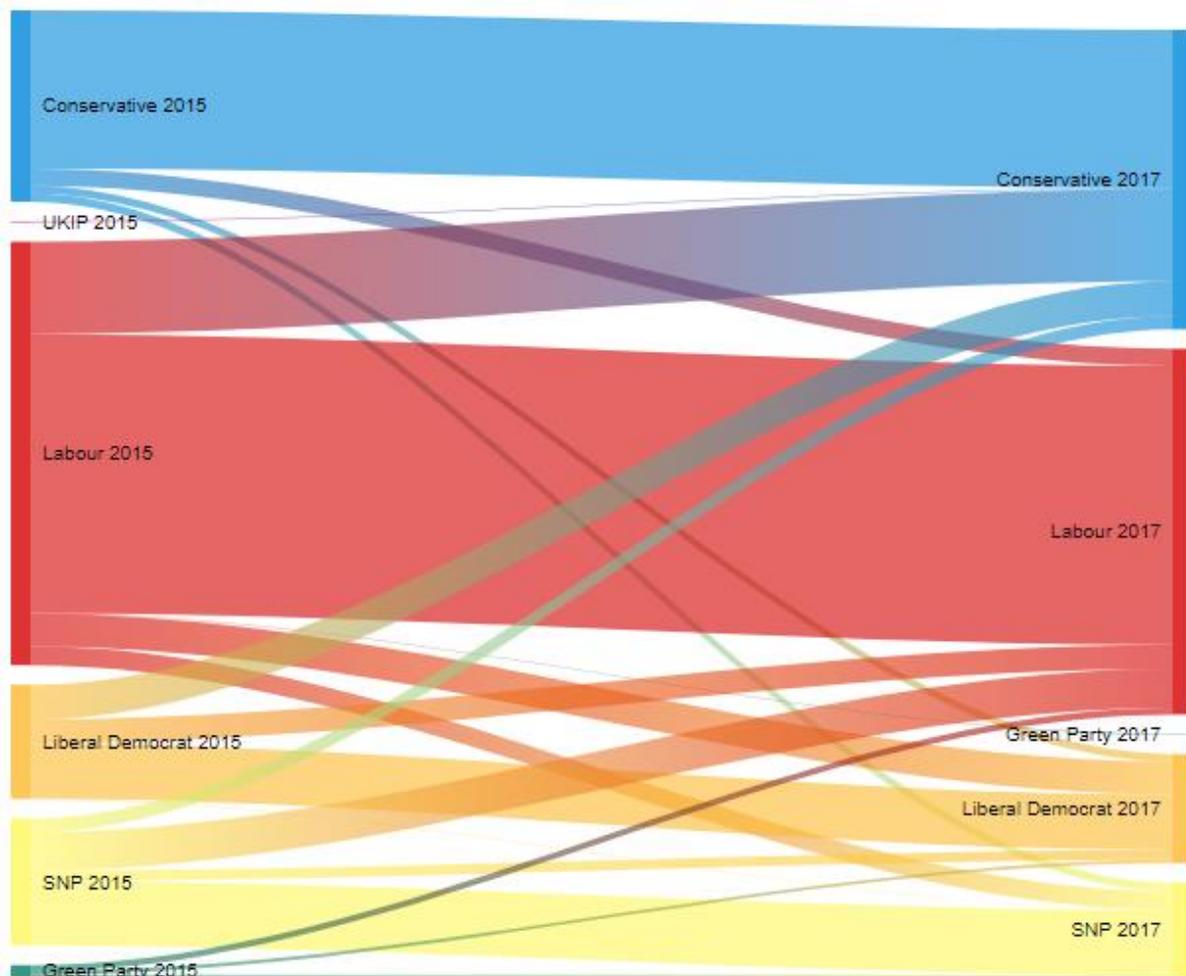
Unfortunately, the process of earning forgiveness in politics tends to be a lengthy one, and there is much to suggest that many former Labour voters in Scotland have not excused us for decisions we made in 2014 and our perceived complacency. Overcoming these voters' hostility towards the Labour brand will be no mean feat, particularly among those who now vote SNP and deserted us in their droves in 2015. Complicating matters further is the need to win back those on the other side of the constitutional debate: anti-independence voters who have now opted for the Tories, wary of a perceived 'middle ground' Labour appears to be treading on this pivotal issue.

Adding another layer of complexity is how the EU referendum and the question of Brexit have played out in Scotland. That Nicola Sturgeon has used the decision of voters in England and Wales to justify demands for another independence referendum has led some to assume that Brexit is now the defining issue in Scottish politics, and one which may lead to the breakup of the UK. Yet with over a third of independence supporters favouring the UK's departure from the EU and also going on to support the Tories in 2017, it is difficult to tell how they would vote if a future independence referendum was predicated on Scotland joining the EU.

While this suggests that Scotland is not the anti-Brexit bastion it is often portrayed to be by the SNP, the overriding sentiment among the Scottish electorate is that leaving the EU will not be good for the country, with a poll from March 2018 showing that 61% believe both Scotland and the UK's economy will suffer from Brexit.⁹ Something that should also give pause for thought for any UK-wide party seeking to win in Scotland is that the largest pool of voters are those who voted both 'No' and 'Remain' at 34%. However, not all voters embrace

one identity as strongly as the other – greater numbers say they identify with No than Remain, at 39% to 36%. In August 2017, Sir John Curtice found that “Conservatives led Labour by 45%-34%” among those who identified more with ‘No’ than ‘Remain’, but “among those who identified more strongly as ‘Remain’ than ‘No’ (36%), Labour led the Conservatives 53% to 20%.” This would suggest that Labour’s position on Brexit could be of significant consequence electorally, especially if we are seen to support or facilitate the UK’s departure from the EU.¹⁰ Such a conclusion may be supported by the fact that we have already lost ground among this large pool of voters, having gone into the 2017 election with a position of ‘creative ambiguity’ on Brexit; despite dominating among No/Remain voters in 2015, we won only 4 out of 10 in this demographic in 2017.¹¹

*No/Remain voting behaviour between 2015 and 2017*¹²



Equally, it may be premature to conclude that Brexit alone is determining voting behaviour, or will do so in the future. Anecdotal reports from activists in Scotland suggest that it is rarely brought up on the doorstep, and at any rate, is not mentioned as frequently as independence. That the constitutional question is more salient than Brexit would appear to be supported by the focus groups conducted in Glasgow, during which greater emphasis was placed on the former issue.

This tendency was marked in the discussion that took place with Lab-Tory switchers. Unlike the Lab-SNP switchers, their decision to vote Conservative seemed less about a fundamental ideological re-alignment, but came from a strong desire to stop any SNP gains and demands for a second referendum. For some, the Tories seemed better placed to win in 2017, hence their decision to vote for them – but for others, there was wariness about Labour’s sincerity on the issue. Some within the party have noted that such doubts may stem from the party’s drive to win back independence supporters in the wake of the referendum, which in turn created a perception that Labour was going soft on independence. For all of Kezia Dugdale’s efforts to forge a stronger anti-independence position, matters were not helped by reports just before the 2017 election that Corbyn was prepared to allow another referendum. Indeed, Corbyn’s own political record was raised in the Lab-Con focus group, with one member referring to his support for other “secessionist movements” and suggesting he would view Scottish independence in similar terms.

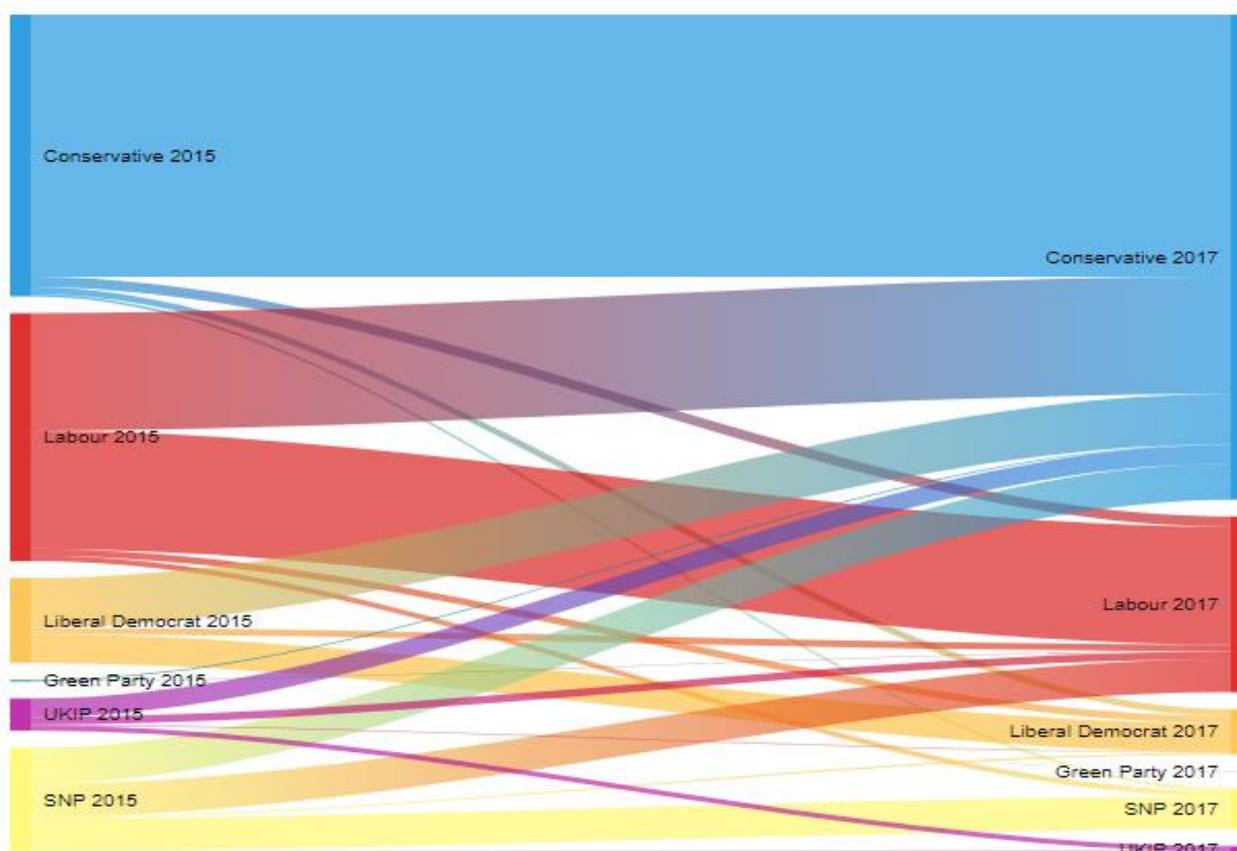
In contrast to Labour’s perceived lack of clarity on this issue, the Tories offered these voters the message that they wanted to hear – no to a second referendum, and no to Scottish independence. It is hard not to conclude that if we are to win over Lab-Tory switchers again, we must communicate a clear and unambiguous anti-independence position.

Yet, we know that we face the double challenge of convincing not only these voters, but those who have turned to the SNP after voting Yes in 2014. Our 2017 performance suggests a small measure of success in winning over some of these voters, which helped offset our losses to the Conservatives. Gaining Yes voters at the expense of No voters means the party “finds itself straddling two horses on the constitutional question,”¹³ and raises questions about how we hold on to these voters and attract more SNP switchers if we have a strong anti-independence message. Findings from the focus groups highlighted how difficult this task would be: some participants stated that Labour would need to support Scottish

independence if they were to vote for them again. Other messages from this focus group made clear the continued support for independence among those who were convinced of its merits during the 2014 referendum campaign, and also the depth of hostility towards Labour. This would suggest that any attempt to soften our position on independence in order to win them back would be a high-risk strategy with minimal gains, and the potential to put off our existing voters and potential Tory switchers who already doubt our credibility on this front.

While support for or opposition to independence was clearly a key factor in determining voting behaviour, gauging the importance of Brexit to both Yes and No voters proved more difficult. While the SNP focus group was solidly Remain in 2016 and agreed that Brexit would be bad for Scotland, the Lab-Con switcher group was split 50-50. Each participant said they would vote the same way if the referendum was held again tomorrow; those who voted Remain did not believe it would be positive, while those who voted Leave did express some concern about certain issues (in particular, Northern Ireland). Nonetheless, there was not a strong sense that this was the make or break issue.

No/Leave voting behaviour between 2015 and 2017 ¹⁴



The party that would appear to be most impacted by its own position on Brexit is in fact the SNP, whose enthusiasm for a second referendum on the basis that Scotland voted Remain appears to have dented its support among Yes/Leave voters – with four in ten of these switching at 2017.¹⁵ This indicates the risks of a second referendum on the basis that Scotland would seek EU membership, as there is no way of telling whether these Yes/Leavers prefer the prospect of a UK outside the EU or an independent Scotland in the EU. The lesson to be learned here is that we should avoid viewing Scotland through a narrow, anti-Brexit prism, which is mostly of the SNP's own making. While there is clearly a larger pool of Remain voters in Scotland, the SNP lost stock among its Leave-voting supporters, some of whom came to us – and while Brexit is of undoubted importance, a clear position on independence and a second referendum appears to be a dealbreaker for the majority of Scottish voters.¹⁶

How voters perceive Labour, other parties and their leaders

Not only do we face the challenge of appealing to two groups of voters who hold seemingly irreconcilable views on constitutional issues – but also the task of reversing long-term, negative perceptions of the Labour Party which have built up over many years, the evidence for which can be drawn from views expressed in the focus groups and recent polling.

The group of Lab-SNP switchers was scathing in its assessment of Labour Party: from being a “shambles,” to “totally duplicitous”; a “shower of career politicians,” who “have lost their way” and no longer represent the working class. The reasons for this palpable sense of hostility towards the party were varied: unsurprisingly, some referred to the Blair era and the feeling that the party had lost touch, with the specific issue of Iraq being mentioned, while others raised the issue of the independence campaign and its fallout.

Among Lab-Con switchers, there was less anger but more frustration at the state of Labour, which was viewed as weak, divided and unclear in what it stands for. Yet there was also appreciation of the fact that the party had lost a lot of talent in 2015, with one participant stating that they had voted Labour solely because of Jim Murphy and would do so if he stood again. Of interest is the fact that both focus groups were united in a sense of confusion about the purpose and point of the Scottish Labour Party – namely, was it an

offshoot of the UK party, being directed largely from London, or an autonomous entity truly capable of making its own policies?

Beyond a shared sense of dismay at the state of both Scottish and UK Labour, there was little that seemed to unite these two groups of former voters. Lab-Tory switchers attested to their dislike of the SNP's monopoly on nationalism and 'Scottishness', as well as a desire for a stronger and clearer anti-independence position, and more wholehearted criticism of the SNP's record in government. In particular, there were concerns about the mismanagement of public services, with the issue of cuts to local government, police forces and hospitals being mentioned. They were also critical of SNP attempts to build a "nanny state," criticising the concept of certain universal benefits (specifically baby boxes) and expressing some support for means testing, and emphasis on greater individual responsibility as an element of the welfare system. As expected, perceptions of Nicola Sturgeon were negative: participants considered her to be obsessed with independence, albeit with impressive communication and party management skills.

On the other hand, Lab-SNP switchers were sanguine in their assessment of the SNP's record in government, and rather concerningly, implied that criticism of Scottish government policy was akin to 'doing Scotland down.' With the SNP having been in government for more than a decade, there is plenty to attack their record on – yet the perception persists that they have done "relatively well," with the focus group suggesting that they were mostly responsible for social progress north of the border, while Labour cannot point to any significant achievements. To Lab-SNP switchers, the SNP are now firmly on what used to be our territory, and are considered to be the only party that cares about social justice. Any difficult decisions they have had to make are attributed to Tory austerity, while they have also adopted the mantle of the 'real opposition' to the Tories at a national level. Criticism of the SNP by Scottish Labour was therefore viewed as petty sniping from a party with a lack of ambition with no alternative programme, which contrasted unfavourably with the image of a self-confident and capable Scotland projected by Nicola Sturgeon.

Among Lab-SNP switchers, the Scottish Conservatives fared little better – none would ever consider voting Tory. However, assessments were more positive among Lab-Con switchers, who felt that Ruth Davidson would stand up for those who voted for her. This appears to be

a perception shared by 2017 Labour voters, 48% of whom think that she is doing a good job as party leader.¹⁷ Yet while these switchers felt positively about Ruth Davidson, they could hardly be described as converts to the Tory cause; rather, they appeared to have the edge on certain issues – opposing independence for one, but also fiscal responsibility and sound management of local government.

What came through from both groups is that in contrast to Nicola Sturgeon and Ruth Davidson, Richard Leonard has not yet made the impact required if Labour is to improve its standing in Scotland. This is substantiated by recent polling – while Davidson and Sturgeon have high favourability ratings (35% and 40% respectively), Leonard sits at 9% - with 35% not having an opinion of him at all.¹⁸

Of course, it is not only the reputation of the Scottish Labour Party that is swaying voters, but also that of the UK party and its leader. In some quarters, Labour's 2017 performance in Scotland has been attributed to Corbyn's leadership, on the basis that he has taken the party in a leftward direction that appeals to the sensibilities of Scottish voters. There may be some truth in this, with the appeal of Corbyn and the 2017 manifesto being credited for our performance among young people.¹⁹ Even for those who voted SNP in 2017, 48% thought Corbyn was doing well in January of this year. Nonetheless, this does not mean they will vote for us, and 43% of the same group of voters also thought he was doing badly.²⁰

The latter sentiment was prevalent throughout the Lab-SNP focus group. While they thought he was the best Labour leader in years, this would not convince them to vote for the party again, and he was also considered to be facilitating Brexit. Regardless of Corbyn's left-wing credentials, there remained a sense that Labour are moving to the right in England to appease Tory and UKIP voters; something that is out of step with Scotland's alleged left-leaning character.

More severe criticism of the party leadership was reserved to the Lab-Con focus group, in which participants were strongly critical of Corbyn. Not only was this due to his perceived sympathy for Scottish independence, but for his positions on a variety of issues – including defence, foreign policy, and his overall credibility as a leader. Several participants made clear that their vote for the Tories in 2017 was due not only because of their staunch opposition to independence, but due to ongoing concerns about the leadership, and also

the behaviour of Momentum. When asked how Labour could win earn their support again, several participants said that replacing Corbyn was a necessary prerequisite.

It is hard not to conclude that Corbyn's presence does not appear to be a boon in Scotland – while proving more popular among younger voters, his presence is not sufficient to win back SNP switchers, whilst actually pushing some traditional Labour voters into the hands of the Tories. Recent polling does not tell a positive story, with Corbyn's position slumping from plus 20 in June 2017 to minus 3 in January of this year, while 24% of those voting for us last year saying he was doing a bad job.²¹ Needless to say, this does not bode well in terms of retaining seats we won in 2017, with polling from July 2018 suggesting that if an election was held tomorrow, we would lose all the gains we made.²²

Looking to the future

To say the political situation in Scotland is complicated would be an understatement, and there is no easy answer as to how we become a credible party once more in the eyes of Scottish voters.

Communication and intent of purpose would appear to be at the heart of the issue – regardless of voters' positions on the central issues, there is a lack of understanding about what Scottish Labour is *for*, a fundamental disbelief in our sincerity, and deep-seated doubts about our credibility.

These trends are encapsulated by the belief among Lab-SNP switchers of a Blairite hangover in the Labour Party, and that it is the natural home of careerist, Oxbridge-educated politicians who are parachuted into safe Scottish seats. Dispelling such a perception should not be difficult in theory – it is hard to think of a Scottish Labour MP or MSP who fits this background – but the strength with which this opinion was expressed indicates the difficulty we face in persuading voters to drop such deep-seated views. The same challenge exists in convincing Lab-Con switchers that we can be trusted not only in opposing independence, but as a credible party of government. Overall, this suggests a pressing need to figure out how we communicate our politics more sincerely and authentically.

As has been stated, the challenge is how we win over voters who think we are not solid enough on independence – as well as those who believe we should actively support it. Given

our position during and since the referendum, and the fact that majority opinion remains against independence and a second referendum in the near future, it is hard to see any benefit in electoral terms of being seen to support either of these.²³

While Labour should not countenance softening its position on independence to placate Lab-SNP switchers, these voters have valid questions that we should seek to answer. These were referred to in the focus group – why is British nationalism seen as acceptable, while Scottish nationalism isn't? How can we sound more positive about Scotland?

The latter question relates to how we articulate our opposition to the SNP in government. It is concerning that despite a decade in government, with valid criticisms to be made of their policies on key issues such as schools, health, and education, that Lab-SNP voters were so positive in assessing their record. It would be an abdication of responsibility not to point out these shortcomings; what may strengthen our position is not only making these criticisms forcefully, but clearly setting out a credible and practicable alternative that Labour would implement if in power in both Scotland and the UK as a whole.

Whether this will be enough to take us over the line in Scottish marginals is difficult to say, and in any case, will depend on how well our opponents do. As Sir John Curtice notes, “a few points either way could mean feast or famine for the SNP,” and their 2017 performance has a number of implications for any future election.²⁴ Was their 2015 result a one-off, driven by a motivated and politicised electorate following the 2014 referendum? If so, are those who voted in the referendum and subsequent general election reverting to their previous status as non-voters, unlikely to turn out at future elections? And while such an outcome is possible, would the prospect of an imminent second independence referendum galvanise these voters into turning out again?

If their vote continues to slide, a small increase in our vote share may be enough to take us over the line in Scottish marginals. However, to do this we must not only hold onto our 2017 voters, but convince others to switch from both the Tories and SNP. Whether we can do so remains to be seen, and could prove exceedingly difficult in the case of SNP voters. The response to a question posed in the Lab-SNP focus group illustrates the scale of this challenge: when presented with a hypothetical situation in which voting Labour would lead

to a majority Labour government and kicking the Tories out at Westminster – they maintained that they would not support us.

We should therefore focus our attention wholeheartedly on those we think we can win – namely Lab-Con switchers, who arguably displayed a greater willingness in the focus group to vote for us. Unlike Lab-SNP switchers, they did not seem to have undergone an ideological conversion to conservatism, and continued to agree with what could be deemed ‘traditional’ Labour policy positions; voting Conservative mostly due to their visceral dislike of Corbyn and distrust of Labour over Scottish independence. Convincing them will not be easy, but if we can assure them that we are solid on the constitutional question, this may be enough to deliver for us.

Ultimately, our chances of winning the next UK election will increase if we improve our performance in Scotland. Not only will this help dispel any fears that we will ever be propped up by the SNP or even go into coalition with them (an accusation which affected our standing in 2015 and could be easily resurrected), but the number of winnable marginals there means our ability to secure a majority government will be greatly enhanced. The evidence gathered so far suggests there remains a substantial mountain to climb if we are to ensure this is the case, and any assumption that Scotland will simply “come back” to Labour is wide off the mark.

Conclusions & questions for further investigation

- There is anger and distrust towards us amongst former Labour voters who now support the SNP or the Tories, yet the reasons for both groups are different. SNP voters have not forgiven us for our conduct in 2014 and beyond, while Tory voters are simply not convinced that we are credible in opposing independence.
- There is confusion about the point of the Scottish Labour Party – in particular, its autonomy and purpose. Matters are not helped by the fact that Richard Leonard appears to be struggling to compete for attention with Nicola Sturgeon and Ruth Davidson.

- Jeremy Corbyn appears to be a mixed blessing in electoral terms. While having greater success in attracting younger voters, it was clear from focus groups that his presence is doing little to bring back SNP voters, whilst repelling those who have switched to the Tories, and distrust him because of his record on foreign policy, defence and Northern Ireland. How do we address this?
- Is it possible to identify which referendum is having a greater effect on voting behaviour in Scotland?
- Labour-Tory switchers seem more likely to come back to us in the future. How can we ensure this is the case? What kind of swing will this require to reap benefits in electoral terms?
- How do we mitigate the potential of a strong anti-independence message to put off potential SNP switchers? Similarly, how do we criticise the SNP in government in a way that appeals to them and sounds positive about Scotland?

¹ Chris Prosser & Ed Fieldhouse, "A tale of two referendums – the 2017 election in Scotland," *British Election Study* (02/08/2017) :<http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-findings/a-tale-of-two-referendums-the-2017-election-in-scotland/#.WrPkd2rFKUk>); Ewan MacAskill, "Labour is coming back in Scotland": party predicts revival as Corbyn heads north," *The Guardian*, (23/-8/2017): <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/aug/23/labour-is-coming-back-in-scotland-party-predicts-revival-as-corbyn-heads-north>

² Evan Williams, "Who were the 2017 switchers?" *Labour Home*, (04/08/2017): <http://labourhome.com/who-were-the-2017-switchers/>

³ John Curtice. "Back from the Brink? Prospects for Scottish Labour" *What Scotland Thinks* (08/03/18): <http://blog.whatscotlandthinks.org/2018/03/back-from-the-brink-prospects-for-scottish-labour/>; Chris Curtis & Matthew Smith. "How did 2015 voters cast their ballot at the 2017 general election?" *Yougov* (22/06/2017): <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2017/06/22/how-did-2015-voters-cast-their-ballot-2017-general/>

⁴ John Curtice, "Back from the Brink?"

⁵ Glasgow East: SNP vote fell from 24,116 to 14,024, Labour vote rose from 13,729 to 13,949, Conservative vote rose from 2,544 to 6,186; Glasgow SW - SNP vote fell from 23,388 to 14,386, Labour vote rose from 13,438 to 14,326, Conservative vote rose from 2,036 to 5,524; Inverclyde - SNP vote fell from 24,585 to 15,050, Labour vote rose from 13,522 to 14,666, Tories vote rose from 4,446 to 8,399.

⁶ Chris Prosser & Ed Fieldhouse, "A tale of two referendums."

⁷ John Curtice. "Back from the Brink?"

⁸ Emily Gray, "Scottish Public Opinion Monitor – March 2018," *Ipsos Mori* (14/03/2018): <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/scottish-public-opinion-monitor-march-2018>

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Chris Prosser & Ed Fieldhouse, "A tale of two referendums."

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ John Curtice. "Back from the Brink?"

¹⁴ Chris Prosser & Ed Fieldhouse, "A tale of two referendums."

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Yougov/The Times Survey Results, 12-16 Jan 2018:

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¹⁸ David Clegg, "Labour slip backwards in Scotland as SNP set to regain seats lost in 2017 vote," *Daily Record* (13/07/2018): <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/labour-slip-backwards-scotland-snp-12908057>

¹⁹ Libby Brooks, "Corbynite candidate aims to capitalise on Scottish Labour youth surge," *The Guardian* (27/10/2017): <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/oct/27/corbynite-candidate-aims-to-capitalise-on-scottish-labour-youth-surge>

²⁰ Yougov/The Times Survey Results, 12-16 Jan 2018:

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²¹ Hamish Macdonnell, "'Corbyn bounce' falls flat as Scottish support for Labour slides," *The Times* (17/01/2018): <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/corbyn-bounce-falls-flat-as-scottish-support-for-labour-slides-pqnhh0s6v>

²² David Clegg, "Labour slip backwards in Scotland."

²³ Chris Green, "SNP hails 'historically high' Scottish independence support – but voters don't want quick IndyRef2," *iNews* (12/07/2018): <https://inews.co.uk/news/scotland/snp-hails-historically-high-support-for-scottish-independence/>

²⁴ Ewan MacAskill, "'Labour is coming back in Scotland'"