

# Scottish National Party proposes pact with Labour for second Brexit referendum

By Steve James  
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Speaking to the BBC at the Scottish National Party's (SNP) annual conference in Glasgow, Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon announced that the party's 35 Westminster MPs would vote for a second referendum on Britain's relationship to the European Union (EU).

Leading figures have also indicated the SNP is open to an election pact with Labour and cooperation with a government led by Jeremy Corbyn.

Labour too is moving towards supporting a second Brexit poll, meaning that, despite protestations, the two parties are coming closer together.

Previously senior figures in the SNP had suggested that open support for a rerun of the 2016 vote would depend on the Scottish government acquiring some sort of veto on the outcome. The SNP have also been concerned that a rerun could return the same result as in 2016 when Scotland voted by 62 percent to remain in the EU while across Britain 52 percent chose to leave.

Sturgeon's change in position is bound up with the deepening and intractable crisis afflicting all aspects of the Conservative government's efforts to negotiate a viable Brexit deal. The Tories are split between factions supporting Prime Minister Theresa May's clumsy "soft-Brexit" plan negotiated at Chequers seeking continued tariff-free access to the Single European Market, a smaller faction supporting remaining in the EU and the hardline anti-EU faction proposing a "hard" or even "no deal" Brexit. This Brexiteer faction, much larger than the Remainers and backed by the Democratic Unionist Party's 10 MPs who give the Tories their majority, has thus far dictated May's agenda.

Since the 2016 poll, the SNP has sought, and failed, to extract any concessions either from the May

government or the EU regarding a special arrangements to ensure Scottish access to the single market, post-Brexit. Instead, the Scottish government has become embroiled in a Supreme Court case over whether powers repatriated from the EU post-Brexit should be devolved to Edinburgh or remain in London. A Supreme Court ruling is expected later this month.

The SNP leadership, speaking for Scottish-based industry and finance, is convinced that Brexit will be a catastrophe for most of the Scottish economy, as well as running counter to the party's perspective of Scottish independence. The SNP have for decades pursued a strategy of "independence in Europe," without which Scotland is completely unviable as an economic entity. It therefore, at the very least, opposes any version of Brexit that leaves Scotland, and England, its largest market, outside the single market and customs union.

Speaking to *ITV News*, Sturgeon said, "I cannot envisage us voting for anything that doesn't include single market and customs union." If Theresa May negotiated "a bad deal, a no-deal or a blind-deal Brexit and the House of Commons doesn't support that, then I think everything is to play for in terms of putting the single market and customs union back on the table."

According to SNP's calculations, with the party's 35 MPs, rival factions of Tory MPs likely to oppose any deal based on May's Chequers proposals and the Labour Party moving towards opposing Chequers, May's likelihood of winning a majority is slim. SNP leader in Westminster, Ian Blackford, promised "maximum disruption" to the British government's legislative programme in the Commons.

The SNP moves come at the same time as the Labour Party's recent conference voted to leave open the option for a second Brexit poll. Blairite Shadow Brexit

Secretary, Keir Starmer, won a standing ovation from pro-Remain delegates for his statement, off script, that “our options must include campaigning for a public vote and nobody is ruling out Remain as an option.”

Subsequently, former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown stated that he expected a second poll to take place sometime after the Brexit date of March 29, 2019. Brown speculated that Britain and the EU would not agree an exit deal but that extended transition arrangements would be put in place until at least 2022. He expected the general election manifestos of Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP all to support a second vote some time before then.

Electoral calculations also stand behind renewed talk of an arrangement between Labour and the SNP. The Scottish Labour Party has been unable to replicate the success of Labour in England and Wales under Corbyn. Thus far, there has neither been much expansion in the party’s membership or a shift towards it in the opinion polls. Labour, which for decades dominated Scottish politics in Westminster, the Scottish parliament in Holyrood and in local government, is so discredited that it currently remains third with 21 percent of votes in the opinion polls, against 24 for the Tories and 43 percent for the SNP.

Writing in the *Scotsman*, long-standing economics and politics correspondent Bill Jamieson observed, “With Tories and Labour neck and neck, another minority government is no remote outcome. ... A Labour-SNP coalition is thus by no means impossible—indeed it increasingly looks a plausible runner.”

The SNP has indicated repeatedly its willingness to serve as some form of partner for an incoming Labour government. Prior to the 2017 general election, the SNP offered to support Labour in power on an “issue by issue” basis, or by some form of “progressive alternative” pact. The SNP ruled out a formal coalition, but Labour rejected any working arrangement with the SNP at all.

As the Brexit crisis deepens, and with it a possible general election, similar proposals have begun to reappear. These have been tied, for purely presentational purposes aimed at the SNP’s socially disparate membership, either to the prospect of a second Scottish independence referendum or removal of Britain’s submarine based nuclear arsenal from

Faslane, near Glasgow.

From the standpoint of the dominant, anti-Brexit, sections of the British, including the Scottish ruling class, a Labour/SNP arrangement of some form might be the most viable means to reverse Brexit.

Corbyn has rejected the demand for a second independence referendum, but in the most guarded terms. He told the media prior to Labour’s September conference that a fresh referendum was not a good idea, but Labour was “not ruling out” a change of position “at the time.” Speaking last week, a spokesman for Corbyn ruled out “pacts or coalitions involving a Labour government led by him.” But this is a position Labour would be forced to take prior to a general election and could also be reversed “at the time.” Certainly, Corbyn throughout his period as Labour leader has repeatedly made clear that he is willing, in the interests of keeping peace with the Blairites, to turn his back on positions he once held dear.

For the SNP, a deal with Labour, would serve the same role as the Democratic Unionist Party’s current “confidence and supply” arrangement with May—a chance to employ Westminster arithmetic to chisel out financial concessions for the regional elite in return for coming to British imperialism’s aid in its hour of need.

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