

# As Support for Independence Soars, Scottish Nationalists Must Unite

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*Alex Salmond is back. Scotland's former First Minister, under whom the SNP went from strength to strength, has unveiled his own 5-point plan together with MSP Alex Neil, to address the economic aftershocks of the pandemic in Scotland.*

There have been rumours for some time of Salmond's return to the Scottish political scene and this was the first indication that he may do so. Having now left his [court case](#) behind him – what some of his supporters [believe](#) was a conspiracy to prevent his return – Salmond will have work to do to improve his tarnished public image. It cannot be denied that there was at some point a breakdown in relations between Nicola Sturgeon and her mentor, Alex Salmond, which has led to a divide in the party. Sturgeon, herself, when recently interviewed on Sky News, admitted that Salmond may be '[angry](#)' with her because she was not prepared to lie on his behalf concerning allegations of sexual assault. Salmond's supporters say Sturgeon herself has led a campaign to prevent Alex Salmond from returning to Scottish politics.

Therefore Salmond's publication of a [document](#) outlining a different approach to tackling the fallout from Covid, involving 'learning lessons from Asia', is a highly significant move. It is essentially a direct challenge to Nicola Sturgeon's leadership, in the midst of the pandemic. At the same time, SNP grassroots members staged a rebellion during the party conference over the weekend, by electing a group of figures who disagree with Sturgeon's independence plan. The group, which includes Joanna Cherry MP, believes the Scottish government should have a plan B should Boris Johnson continue to refuse giving Scotland a Section 30 order to allow another independence referendum. There is a growing swell of support amongst SNP grassroots members and independence activists for a second referendum as a matter of urgency. They believe that the time for such a vote is now, given the momentum the movement has received as a result of Brexit and unpopular Westminster leadership. This faction is (unofficially) led by Salmond and Cherry. There even exists a belief amongst some in this group that Nicola Sturgeon herself secretly doesn't want independence. This, I consider to be a fallacy. Sturgeon is simply treading carefully, and trying to avoid the turmoil and political arrests we saw in the aftermath of the referendum in [Catalonia](#).

Such divisions in the SNP, do, of course, harm the independence movement. But can Alex Salmond really provide a challenge to Nicola Sturgeon? Unlikely. Salmond may have the support of Joanna Cherry and others in the SNP for his more bullish approach to the independence movement, but Sturgeon's more cautious style has proved highly popular with the Scottish electorate. Never before has there been so much support for the First Minister, with her approval ratings regularly soaring high above those of Boris Johnson. And

only this week it was revealed that support for Scottish independence is at an all-time high of [56%](#). While Salmond was something of a divisive figure, Sturgeon has been far more popular. It's almost impossible to see how he could pose any real threat to her position. Although Salmond did a huge deal to make the necessary gains the SNP needed during his 20 years as leader, his time is over. Sturgeon has broader, more mainstream appeal, and her more careful approach was just what was required during the pandemic.

Indeed the SNP is on a high right now after its conference over the weekend. Several new welfare policies were [announced](#) which will score the party points with the electorate prior to the Holyrood elections in May next year. Firstly, Scotland becomes the first nation in the world to provide sanitary products free for all women, tackling 'period poverty'. Secondly, more money is to be given to low income families - an extra £10 a week per child from February - and before Christmas a separate 'gift' of £100 will be paid to every family in receipt of school meals. Another announcement at the conference was the creation of the 'Young Person's guarantee', which will give all young people between 16 and 24 the guarantee of work, education or training. The Pathway to Apprenticeships scheme will provide work-based training and a grant of £100 given to school leavers up to the age of 18.

These measures are all ones which the average working person will 'feel' and which will have a genuine impact on their lives. It is likely these initiatives will translate into more votes for the SNP at the ballot box next year, and even more support for independence. Such focus on welfare by the Scottish government creates even more distance between it and the Westminster government. Earlier this year, top economists warned the UK government not to impose new austerity measures in response to the vast spending plans actioned during the pandemic, but there is no doubt that at some point people are going to be asked to tighten their belts. And given the Conservative government's record on austerity, it is working people on lower incomes who will end up paying the price for future economic recovery.

All in all, it's a fantastic time for Scottish independence. The mood has never been more buoyant, despite internal divisions. To ensure the independence goal is reached however, the party must unite. If Alex Salmond and his supporters really care about independence then they will give Nicola Sturgeon their full backing and support her strategy to secure [#indyref2](#).

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