

23062 Nicola Sturgeon leaves with Scotland split in two

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When Nicola Sturgeon joined the Scottish National Party as a 16-year-old schoolgirl, the party was a minor one and the prospect of independence a distant dream. It held two seats in the Westminster Parliament.

On February 15th, at the age of 52, Ms Sturgeon said she was resigning as first minister of Scotland and as the head of the dominant party in Scottish politics. The party has governed since 2007; she has been first minister since 2014. The party holds 45 of 59 Scottish seats in Westminster. In polling it still consistently commands the support of around 45% of the Scottish electorate. The numbers ebb and flow but roughly half of Scots favour independence. It is so much, and yet much too little.

Such a solid electoral bloc in favour of independence is not a given. After the referendum of 2014 went decisively in favour of the union, support for breaking away might have fizzled. Instead, Ms Sturgeon ensured the question remained the dominant divide of Scottish politics; membership of her party surged on her watch.

Scots now hold their views on the constitution more firmly than any party identification, notes a new study of the consequences of the 2014 vote. Scotland is two nations, riven by one issue. Three-quarters of independence supporters say they could never vote Conservative. Six in ten unionists say they could never vote for the Scottish National Party.

That big block of entrenched support is Ms Sturgeon's legacy but it is also her failure. She could not lift support for independence to a level that would force Westminster to accede to demands for a second referendum. A large nationalist movement created an equally large and determined unionist one. Public debate became bitter and toxic; Ms Sturgeon did too little to temper it. In her resignation statement, she acknowledged she was part of the problem: Scottish public opinion about her is too polarised to widen separatism's appeal. It will require someone else "to reach across the divide in Scottish politics".

Ms Sturgeon pioneered a form of liberal populism. Liberal, because her idea of an independent Scotland was Europhile and socially democratic—more Scandinavian than British. Her party has always cast Scotland as essentially different to Tory England. The vote for Brexit in 2016 and the ascent of Boris Johnson to Downing Street seemed only to sharpen the divide.

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