

# THE CONVERSATION

## Jim Murphy wins in Scotland ... but can he save Ed Miliband?

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**Eric Shaw**

Senior Lecturer in Politics, University of Stirling

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Jim's the newheid bummer. Danny Lawson/PA

So the bookies **were right**. The new leader of Labour in Scotland is indeed Jim Murphy. The challenge from Neil Findlay (less so Sarah Boyack) wasn't enough to produce an upset. Not only is the future of Scottish Labour in Murphy's hands, but to a fair extent the outcome of the 2015 UK election is too.

He was always the front-runner, of course. The affable and soft-spoken MP was by far the best known of the three candidates. In an age when the relative merits of party leaders is a key consideration for voters, the fact that he is a consummate TV performer probably swayed a fair number of party members. The surprise, in a way, is that his victory was not a foregone conclusion. Explaining why sheds a light on one of the problems he will face as leader.

### Blairite tarnish

Murphy earned his spurs as a Blairite fixer by helping out in some adroit political manoeuvring even before he was elected to parliament at the age of just 29 in 1997, helping

to clear leftists out of the way in Scotland for example. In his years as MP, as he slowly climbed the ladder, he consolidated his reputation as a loyal Blairite and as a politician with considerable political acumen and organisational skills.

In the Scottish leadership election, however, this reputation did not serve him well – particularly in the trade union section of the three-way bloc (the others being Scottish Labour politicians and party members). The fact that he was backed by none of the three major unions – Unison, Unite and his own, the GMB – was bound to dampen his support among the union rank and file, though it should be remembered that the union vote was decided by one-member-one-vote.

Murphy will be well aware that, as leader, he will need to establish a better working relationship with top union officials. The loosening of the relationship between the party and the unions that occurred during the Blair years was never replicated in Scotland. Murphy is well aware that New-Labour-style politics will not be welcomed by the unions, by the party at large and, indeed, by Scotland as a whole.

So Murphy will probably seek to fight the 2015 UK election and 2016 Scottish election in a way which reflects the balance of opinion across the party. Where New Labour kept union leaders at arm's length, Murphy will replace this with more openness, understanding and lots of smiles.

## The Donald, Henry, Jack, Wendy, Iain, Johann and Anas Show

Murphy will be well aware is that he is Scottish Labour's eighth leader in 15 years (counting current caretaker leader Anas Sarwar, who did not run). There seems to be little security of tenure in the post. After Donald Dewar, the first of them, died in post, the rest have tended to be edged out either because of a minor misdemeanour or after an election defeat. But the underlying reason was that they all struggled to gain and retain the confidence of their party. Why?



Murphy: Scottish Secretary  
days Carl Court/PA

Labour's problem is that, since Dewar's untimely death, it has lacked a leader of comparable public stature to Alex Salmond. Perhaps for this reason, perhaps also because of weaknesses in their repertoires of skills, none obtained mastery of their party.



Donald Dewar: last Scottish Labour leader to look the part?  
David Cheskin/PA

The institutional position of the leader has also been rather insecure. For whatever reason, successive leaders were unable to use the power of patronage or control over party resources to consolidate their position. And their power bases were primarily networks of friends and allies held together by personal connections rather than by shared principle and

outlook.

So Murphy's task will be to construct a coalition, both within Holyrood and in the wider party, which will afford him solid and durable support in the testing times ahead. He made clear during his campaign that he will seek to bolster the post of Scottish Labour leader, both vis a vis the party in Scotland and the UK-wide power structure. After his predecessor **Johann Lamont's biting criticism** about Scotland being little more than a "branch office" to London, not to mention the SNP's surging support, he arguably had little alternative of course.

In this task, Murphy admittedly has a big advantage: as the first Westminster frontbencher since Dewar to make the move from London to Edinburgh he has considerable experience and political know-how, a shrewd understanding of how the party machine works and a wide network of political connections.

## The hard road ahead

There is no doubt about the scale of the challenge. A raft of polls indicate that Scottish Labour is lagging behind the SNP by a wide margin. The reason that this is equally alarming for the UK party is that its standing in the polls is stuck in the lower 30s, making prospects for an outright win next May seem pretty remote and another hung parliament far more likely.

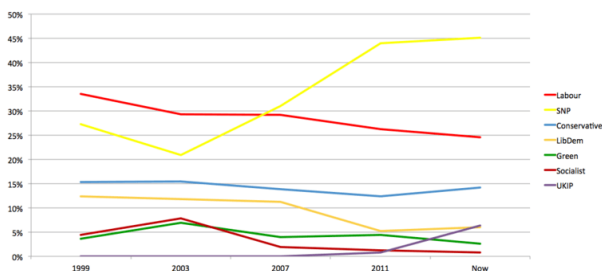


Forward march! Maciej Czekajewski

This means that Labour is heavily reliant on its solid phalanx of Scottish seats. Murphy's priority as leader is simply to hold on to as many as possible. This may be difficult.

The most remarkable feature of the independence referendum was the huge turnout – the highest ever in a UK election. Given that electoral participation varies strongly with age and class it seems likely that many new voters were young and working class – precisely the groups to whom Labour would normally expect to appeal. But evidence from the polls indicates they are swinging to the SNP. This compounds a period of gradually electoral attrition as, since 1999, the overall curve of Labour's share of the vote has been downwards.

## Scottish election results



Now = Dec 2014 YouGov polling The Conversation

## Blairite baby in the bathwater?

There are those among the Blairites who believe that Scottish Labour faltered because it was “not New Labour enough”. But I would predict that Murphy will make little progress in the current Scottish climate if he sticks to old Blairite nostrums like the pursuit of a mythical middle ground or a putative “middle Scotland”, triangulation and business-wooing.

My guess is that Murphy is too shrewd and too sensitive to party opinion to adopt such an approach. But one New Labour axiom he could imbibe is its capacity to operate strategically. There is a sense that Scottish Labour is on the wrong side of history, with a growing belief that independence, as the leading Scottish journalist Iain Macwhirter, recently put it, “is now surely only a matter of time.”

A besetting weakness of Scottish Labour has been its pragmatic, unimaginative and ad-hoc mentality. It has exhibited little willingness, aptitude or capacity to widen its angle of vision or think in terms of stories and narratives. It has resorted to the tropes of old-style Westminster adversarial politics which, to many voters, smacks too much of bickering over minor issues or personalised name-calling.

It has done little to present an alternative unionist version of the SNP’s self-confidently social-democratic vision of an independent Scotland, which is what needs to do now. For all its faults, New Labour understood how to build a narrative and develop strategies with clear goals, policies to achieve those goals and institutional mechanisms to see that everything was on track. In short, can Scottish Labour, under Murphy, learn to think big?



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