

The SNP-Greens deal might suggest greater alignment of policy agendas in Holyrood, but there will be disagreements in any future referendum



The SNP and Scottish Greens recently announced a power-sharing deal to create a governing majority in Holyrood, which could then add pressure on the UK government to approve a second independence referendum. [James Mitchell](#) discusses what the two parties historically had in common, how power has changed the SNP in recent years, and the potential of this new agreement.

Devolution has been kind to the SNP and Scottish Greens, opening up opportunities previously closed to them. More SNP parliamentarians were elected in the first elections to the Scottish Parliament in 1999 than the party had ever had at Westminster throughout its history. And Robin Harper won the Greens' first parliamentary seat.

Where the two parties converge

The two parties also had much in common. The SNP's policy profile included a deep hostility to nuclear weapons and nuclear power, and the party had long included a number of prominent environmentalists. Post-materialists, in Ronald Inglehart's terms, were more likely to be found in the SNP and amongst its voters than in other parties. But materialist concerns were more prominent in the SNP. The Scottish Greens are, of course, unambiguously post-materialist though the party has successfully broadened its appeal over the last two decades. Scottish Greens have been champions of local democracy, land reform, and challenging social conservatism in Scotland.

Decentralisation and participatory democracy appeared to be part of each party's DNA. Each exhibited internal democratic procedures that facilitated active membership. Thomas Poguntke's description of Green parties having 'low degrees of formalisation and bureaucratisation, elements of direct democracy such as collective decision-making or introduction of the imperative mandate' could have applied to the SNP, if less so, in the past. The Scottish Greens advocated constitutional reform and were initially part of the Scottish Constitutional Convention that met from 1989 agreeing a scheme of devolution, but suspended involvement over holding a referendum to include options – independence, devolution, and the (then) status quo – which the SNP also then supported. The Greens came to support independence though Harper remained unconvinced; but Green support for independence was largely instrumental, whereas SNP support was more a matter of first principle.

Where the two parties diverge

These profiles partly reflected their status as opposition parties. Devolution offered the opportunity to govern, and governmental power, or even its prospect, has a habit of changing parties. Poguntke's comment on Green parties marching 'through the institutions has changed the marchers more than the institutions' has been all too true of the SNP as it set its sights on government. It was not the first party to change with the whiff of power in its nostrils. In the early years of devolution, the SNP abandoned collective leadership and eroded party democracy. Power in the party shifted from the party activists to the parliamentary party and leadership. One member one vote was used to elect the leader, deputy, and parliamentary candidates, undermining activists assumed to be fundamentalist hardliners. The party's internal decision-making processes were hollowed out. The status of leader assumed significance with the prospect that the individual might, and indeed did become, First Minister.

These changes occurred under John Swinney's leadership (2000-2004). Winning an election allowed Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon to assume even more power. So long as they delivered, then the party faithful would follow. Power shifted further to the leadership. The SNP leader now controls the party in ways that would have been unacceptable to previous generations of SNP activists. But the prospect of independence has made SNP members compliant.

But will the Scottish Greens go the same way? Green Parties elsewhere have followed a similar path though have not taken it so far as the SNP. The visibility of the leader, often personifying the party in public perceptions, can enhance the leader's power though it can undermine them when problems arise and the transition to a new leader occurs. The German Greens placed Joschka Fischer at the forefront of election campaigns two decades ago, taking advantage of his popularity while underplaying, if not abandoning, notions of collective leadership causing some disquiet.

Cooperation, past and present

In 2007, a 'Scottish National Party & Scottish Green Party Cooperation Agreement' was signed by Alex Salmond as SNP leader and Robin Harper and Shiona Baird as Green co-conveners. They agreed to work together on three core issues: opposing new nuclear power stations; legislation to reduce climate-change pollution; and referring to a belief in independence, they would work to extend Holyrood's responsibilities. The two Green MSPs (down from seven won four years before) would support the SNP (with 47 seats in the 129 Parliament) in key votes and the SNP would nominate a Green MSP as a Parliamentary Committee convenor. The SNP and Greens together were still a minority but the Tories had made it clear during the 2007 election that they would support whichever of either Labour or the SNP emerged as the largest party in key votes in Holyrood, welcoming the prospect of influencing policy with Minority Government.

The current arrangement, signed by Nicola Sturgeon and Scottish Greens co-leaders Patrick Harvie and Lorna Slater, is different in a number of ways. It is entitled 'Scottish Government and Scottish Green Parliamentary Party Shared Policy Programme'. Wittingly or otherwise, the absence of references to the SNP (one reference slipped in when the parties agreed to differ on a transport issue) mark a major shift in that party as power has been sucked up to the leadership of that party. It is a much longer document with more detail. It identifies where the two parties agree and disagree. The areas of agreement largely relate to obvious overlaps mentioned above. This includes a commitment to reform the Gender Recognition Act, an issue on which Nicola Sturgeon has more support in the Greens than in her own party.

The agreement to disagree on a range of matters are interesting in three respects. There are areas which are likely to cause tensions between the parties. While the agreement refers to a 'Green economic recovery' and a 'National Strategy for Economic Transformation', its list of matters excluded from the agreement includes 'the role of Gross Domestic Product measurements, and economic principles related to concepts of sustainable growth and inclusive growth' as well as 'aviation policy (except in respect of island aviation connectivity and Highlands and Islands Airports Limited), the future of green ports, and direct financial support to businesses involved in the aerospace, defence and security sectors'. The parties will need to reconcile these intimately connected areas of economic agreement and disagreement.

There are matters of disagreement that are unlikely to arise, such as differences on 'private fee-paying independent schools' and field sports where the SNP do not need the Greens to command a majority in Holyrood even if they became a salient issue.

There are also areas that are beyond Holyrood's competence, but which would become important in the event of an independence referendum. International relations are excluded, including membership of NATO. This is far from the only area where the two parties differ on post-independence politics. This signals a different kind of referendum campaign. Whereas the SNP set the agenda in defining independence in 2014 and other independence campaigners largely accepted this, we can anticipate evidence of more diversity in the pro-independence campaign. The Agreement might suggest greater alignment of the policy agendas of the SNP and Greens in Holyrood, but it exposes fissures and disagreements in any future referendum.

About the Author



James Mitchell ([@ProfJMitchell](https://twitter.com/ProfJMitchell)) is Professor of Public Policy at the University of Edinburgh.

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