

A Fairer, Greener Scotland

Article by Jamie Cooke

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In August 2021, an historic political breakthrough occurred in Scotland. In the Bute House Agreement, the Scottish National Party (SNP), who form a minority government in Scotland, committed to a joint policy programme with the Scottish Green Party, bringing the co-leaders of the Scottish Green Party into government as ministers. This represents the first time that Green politicians have been in government anywhere in the UK and commits the Scottish Government to an ambitious programme of climate adaptation, just transition and social justice as the country prepares to host COP26.

While the presence of Green Party politicians, leaders and government members has been a norm across many European countries for years, the breakthrough of the parties into mainstream British politics has been a slower process. On the UK level, the presence of the profoundly disproportionate “first past the post” voting system for elections to the parliament (known as Westminster) has limited Green impact (had a more proportional system been used for the 2019 general election, the Green Parties across the UK would have secured 12 seats as opposed to the one that they currently hold). Success has been possible within the more proportional Scottish voting system, with the Scottish Green Party present in every session of parliament, and there has been a significant growth in the number of Green councillors in local authorities across the UK, however involvement in government has seemed a distant possibility.

Until now.

So, why has that happened? What opportunities, and risks, does government participation offer to the Scottish Green Party? And what will happen next?

Scotland is in a period of flux and self-reflection as it tries to navigate the complexities and turbulence of a post-pandemic, post-Brexit world. Its constitutional future within the United Kingdom and potential relationship with the European Union are key aspects of political debate in Scotland, and the knowledge that the eyes of the world will be on Scotland when COP26 arrives in Glasgow in November 2021 is leading to a sustained and in-depth assessment of the government and country’s rhetoric and reality around the climate emergency.

The government of Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon was successful in winning the 2021 Scottish Parliamentary elections, yet due to the nature of the proportional voting system narrowly fell one seat short of a majority. An alliance with the Scottish Green Party, which shares several areas of interest and priority with the SNP, creates a robust platform for delivering a progressive policy agenda; burnishes the environmental

credentials of both the SNP and Scotland more widely ahead of COP (the presiding officer of the Scottish Parliament is also, for the first time ever, a Green politician); and lays the groundwork for delivering a second referendum on Scottish independence.

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Pushing for a Greener agenda

Entering government for the first time allows the Scottish Green Party to bring its thinking and policies to the heart of delivery. The [Bute House Agreement](#) includes clear focus on environmental issues, including the just transition, circular economy, public transport and energy efficiency. It also involves cooperation around the constitution, rent control, gender recognition, child poverty, and Scotland's role in the world.

If the commitments are delivered upon, the arrival of the next scheduled Scottish Parliamentary elections in 2026 will have seen a new independence referendum; £1.8 billion invested in renewable heating and increased energy efficiency; increases to the Scottish Child Payment; £500 million in a Just Transition programme for the North East of Scotland as it moves away from dependence on the North Sea oil and gas sector; 110,000 new affordable homes; and new Scottish Government offices in Warsaw and Copenhagen, expanding the existing network of hubs in cities across the globe.

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The SNP has gone through a period of change recently, with a split over issues such as gender recognition and the approach to independence culminating in the creation of a new splinter party, Alba, which unsuccessfully contested the 2021 elections. The more left-leaning radical politics of the Scottish Green Party will carry a lot of attraction for some SNP members, and offers a chance for them to build an alliance and momentum for progressive politics.

This cooperation offers a wide remit for impact, yet also contains areas where public disagreement is allowed and agreed – covering issues such as aviation policy, hunting, and an independent Scotland's membership of NATO. This allows the Scottish Green party the space to retain its own identity – contributing to the government but not solely defined by it; and also the space to push the SNP into different behaviours and approaches.

A recent example of this has been the change of tack from Nicola Sturgeon on the proposal

for the new Cambo oil field off the cost of Shetland, where pressure from the Greens and environmental groups has shifted her position to asking for the proposal to be reassessed. This opportunity to pressure the SNP and “keep them honest”, also represents a role that the Scottish Green Party can play in acting as a bridge between grassroots campaigners and activists, to ensure that critical issues are brought to the heart of government – an impact that can already been seen in the change in rhetoric and intention over areas such as rent control.

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Government - a risky business for smaller parties

The agreement does also present risks for the Scottish Green Party. Any cooperation or coalition agreement can see participating parties, particularly smaller ones, carry the blame for less popular or less successful aspects of the government’s agenda, while missing out on the platitudes – the Liberal Democrats offering a prime example of this in the UK, where they are still recovering from the impact of a coalition with the Conservatives and the reputational damage it caused.

Opposition parties in the Scottish Parliament have attacked the Scottish Green Party as being nothing more than “a branch office of the SNP”, attempting to paint them as gullible lackies providing a greenwash for the Scottish Government. Close alignment to government policy can raise the challenge of seeming to be a rubber stamp to SNP policies, and there is a need for the Scottish Green Party to be clear in its own policy positions and contributions.

This risk was one which concerned some Scottish Green Party members in voting on whether to join the government. Although the proposal was carried with a huge majority (nearly 90 per cent voting in favour) and has been shown to have public support, concerns were raised about the risk that participation in government could neutralise or undermine some of the Scottish Green Party’s more radical positions.

While there are many areas of agreement with the SNP, as shown in the policy proposals agreed, there have also been concerns about the SNP’s propensity to centralise power and control, and its commitment to real change in the economy and society. It will be critical for the Scottish Green Party that it continues to engage its membership throughout its time in government, to ensure their voices and concerns are helping to keep it on track and shape its contributions.

Political opponents have also tried to attack the Scottish Green Party as dangerous extremists who represent a threat to the UK, to business, and to workers. The journalist Andrew Neil, who recently set up, before walking away from, the right-wing GB News, lambasted the price Scotland would pay for giving power to “Eco-zealot Marxists”, while the

Scottish Conservative Party decried a “nationalist coalition of chaos” that would “punish hard-working families, motorists, and the oil and gas industry”. The intention for the government to bring forward a Gender Recognition Act in Scotland has also been controversial, with one Green MSP resigning in the last Parliament to stand as an independent, and well-funded campaigns in Scotland attacking trans rights.

These risks are real for the Scottish Green Party – but they also exist for the SNP, who ultimately did not need to form the agreement to be able to govern successfully. The desire to do so, the support of the membership of both parties, and the significant roles for the new Green ministers demonstrates a level of commitment to the agreement that is promising, and suggests that it is a historic moment for impact, not just rhetoric.

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Taking a chance

The next stages promise to be active ones. The Scottish Government has committed to a very full legislative and policy agenda in its Programme for Government for 2021-22, aiming to create a net-zero nation, rooted in a wellbeing economy and in opportunity and fairness for all.

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to dominate the political and economic landscape and will impact on spending priorities for years to come; yet the imminent hosting of COP26, the critical warnings of numerous reports on the climate, and the extreme weather shocks we have witnessed over the past year all add a wider urgency that the Scottish Government is keen to harness and address. And the question of Scotland’s constitutional future, which the agreement looks to bring to the Scottish people within the next few years, offers a space for imagining what a different Scotland could and should look like, regardless of personal views on preferred outcome.

These are challenging times, yet the window of opportunity for change has opened. By entering government in Scotland, Lorna Slater, Patrick Harvie, and their colleagues in the Scottish Green Party have ensured that they will be crucial voices in making that change happen, rather than watching from the outside.

Time will tell whether this backfires for them electorally; or whether this breakthrough can turn out to be a historic step forward for their sister party in England and Wales. What it does offer is a chance to create a new politics in Scotland, and to work towards a Greener, Fairer Scotland. As the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said in welcoming the Agreement – “It recognises that business as usual is not good enough – we need boldness, courage, and a will to do things differently. That is what we offer.”



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