

It's time for the SNP to smell the coffee

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A [Guardian email](#) this morning has the headline:

‘Seismic night in Scotland’
Labour crushes SNP in Rutherglen and Hamilton West byelection

Michael Shanks takes victory in contest that Labour considered a crucial test of apparent turnaround of its fortunes in Scotland

The associated article notes:

Scottish Labour’s Michael Shanks has won the Rutherglen and Hamilton West byelection in an overwhelming victory over the SNP that the party leadership declared “seismic”, and a clear demonstration that Scotland could lead the way in delivering a Labour government at Westminster at the coming general election.

So let's get some facts right.

First, this was a LibDem style victory on a swing of 20%.

Second, the literal crimes of the outgoing former SNP MP always made a swing of that sort likely.

Third, this was hardly an SNP safe seat. As Lesley Riddoch has noted [in The National](#):

Rutherglen and Hamilton West is the fifth most Labour-supporting seat in Scotland and the 36th most SNP-supporting seat. It had Scotland’s third-highest Labour vote in 2015 and fifth-highest in 2019. If Labour can’t win there – with local issues to grind like the cost of entering SNP-run Glasgow because of its pollution-busting LEZ – they won’t win anywhere.

Fourth, as Lesley also notes:

It's also worth pointing out that few by-election victories survive the following General Election. Indeed, Winnie Ewing's historic 1967 victory over Labour in Hamilton was reversed in 1970.

Recent analysis by Electoral Calculus suggests seats gained in by-elections over the last 40 years are more likely to flip back to their "original" holders than to be held by challengers.

And in Rutherglen and Hamilton West, the "original" holders have pretty much been Labour since the party was formed.

So, the SNP may be set to lose a seat they were always lucky to hold – just like every other governing party.

In other words, this is not quite the result it seems.

And, fifth, part of the win is down to the collapse in the Tory vote:



But, having said all that, the optics for the SNP are not good. It has lost one of its more marginal seats whilst looking like a tired government in Scotland.

But that, maybe, is unsurprising. For a party supposedly of the left, its economic policies have been remarkably neoliberal.

It has also been strongly pro-Union with its leadership being dedicated to using the UK pound, even though its membership has strongly rejected that policy.

And it has failed to deliver a convincing strategy for achieving independence against the combined Unionist hegemony of the Tory and Labour parties, both of whom still have a profoundly colonial mindset whilst being indifferent to the interests of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, even though Labour rules in the last of these.

The SNP did in that case need this loss, in my opinion. Maybe it might just be shocked out if its comfortable indifference to its membership, independence and even governing as a result. If so that would be very good. The last thing the UK needs is a Labour landslide given how far to the right it has also drifted.

In summary, I don't think this a big deal. I don't think Scotland has suddenly found a massive new enthusiasm for Labour, because it already had it in this seat. But I do think the SNP might have to wake up and actually reflect the interests of its membership and Scotland again, and not those of a small coterie around its leader's office. And that would be a good thing.