

Murphy's mountain

Jon Lansman questions whether the new Scottish Labour leader's politics can surmount Labour's problems

The media and the bookies eventually got what they'd predicted all along by a margin that, on the surface at least, looked comfortable. Jim Murphy beat Neil Findlay 56% to 35% with Sarah Boyack on 9%, with Katy Clark ending up with 37% against Kezia Dugdale's 63%. Though no actual voting figures or even turnouts were made public, what neither Murphy nor Dugdale appear to have won is the popular vote. Though it is little consolation compared to the reality of defeat in the electoral college, Murphy and Findlay were neck and neck in terms of member and trade unionist votes, with no-one having an overall majority, whilst Katy Clark did have a clear win in her contest.

It is of course a very disappointing result for those of us who see Jim Murphy as part of the problem rather than as the solution, but it was always going to be a tough contest to win. Compared with the victory of Johann Lamont in 2011, who as a more centrist candidate could count on the backing of centrist MPs and MSPs, Neil and Katy had to do much better than her amongst members and trade unionists to make up their shortfall amongst parliamentarians, but in fact did slightly worse, with Murphy doing better than expected in trade unions, especially those where least campaigning was done.

The question is what happens next. With polls putting the SNP twenty points ahead, it seems certain that Labour stands to lose 15 – 20 seats, compared with its current 40 out of 59 seats in Scotland. Jim Murphy has his work cut out. He has talked leftish during the campaign, and promised inclusivity. He has appointed Neil Findlay to lead on Work, Skills and Training, which is an olive branch and bridge to the Scottish unions, but only one other left MSP to a shadow cabinet of ten plus the leader and deputy.

Pat Rafferty, Unite's Scottish

Secretary, noted afterwards that Murphy had recognised the appetite for real change during the hustings "because as the campaign progressed his arguments became bolder on issues like taxation and a living wage," warning he now needed to turn words into action to start the process of rebuilding Scottish Labour.

So, for all the animosity towards Jim Murphy, and from Unite in particular over his role in stoking the Falkirk row, he is being (and arguably must be) allowed to prove himself. There is also undoubtedly a resurgence of willingness to allow Labour another opportunity to redeem itself within the unions just because Neil and Katy's campaign has shown the presence of a significant left.

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But not everyone will see it that way. How will the unions respond to a Murphy win, having put such great energy into Neil and Katy's campaign? It is too early to say. There has also, however, been talk by some within Unite Scotland of arguing in the run up to next year's Unite Rules revision conference that Unite should allow its Scotland region at least the option of not affiliating to Scottish Labour. Others would go further as is hardly surprising when the majority of Unite members in Scotland are, according to poll evidence, planning to vote SNP next year. Things are bound to get tougher for Labour in the unions and this is not a process that union leaders or politicians can control.

It would be surprising if Jim Murphy didn't give early indication of the way he plans to take the Scottish party. On past experience,



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expect much to happen by diktat, no meaningful consultation with the membership or trade unions about policy or party structures, and rapid moves to reduce party democracy, and centralise power ever more in the Scottish Leader's office. I trust him at his word about keeping Ed Miliband at a distance – but I hope that Ed takes action to improve his intelligence about what's happening in Scotland in the future. The fallout from this election and the referendum will continue to play out with massive consequences for UK Labour and UK politics.

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