

Resignation of Scotland's First Minister Humza Yousaf.

Briefing Note

Monday 29 April 2024

Scotland's First Minister Humza Yousaf has resigned today ahead of facing two Votes of No Confidence (VONC) this week in Holyrood.

Speaking at Bute House this afternoon, the SNP Leader also said he will remain in post until a new leader has been chosen.

Yousaf maintained that he believed that there was a route for him to win the VONCs but said that he was not willing to trade his values and principles to retain power. He said that it was an honour and privilege to lead "the only country I will ever call home", and noted the progress in the fact the UK had a Hindu Prime Minister, Black Welsh First Minister and Muslim Scottish First Minister.

The resignation will trigger a leadership election for the SNP, while details have not been confirmed, this usually requires candidates to gather 100 nominations from over 20 geographical branches of the party. Candidates will then be put before the party membership, who vote based on the alternative voting system. The last SNP Leadership contest was concluded in 41 days, a similar timetable would see a new leader in place before the end of the parliamentary term in June.

Scottish Labour Leader Anas Sarwar responded to the news, saying that "*regardless of political differences, I want to thank Humza Yousaf for his public service. In particular, Scots will remember the dignified way in which he acted while his loved ones faced danger in Gaza*". Scottish Conservative Leader Douglas Ross said "*as he leaves office, on a personal level, I wish Humza Yousaf and his family well*".

Background

Last week, Humza Yousaf ended the Bute House Agreement of power sharing with the Green Party. The Greens reacted to this with more anger and upset than the First Minister had anticipated, and it became clear that he could no longer count on their support while running a minority administration. Hours after the agreement was ended, the Conservative Leader, Douglas Ross, announced he would table a VONC in Humza Yousaf's premiership, with each of the opposition parties confirming they would vote for the motion. On Friday, Labour tabled a VONC in the Scottish Government as a whole, hoping to force a stalemate and trigger a Scottish Parliament election.

Yousaf spent the weekend trying to source enough support to survive the votes but the only party willing to enter dialogue was Alba, led by Alex Salmond and the political price was too high.

The Scottish Conservatives say they still intend to table their vote of no confidence in Humza Yousaf. Labour's statement says they want an election, whether this means they will try to take down the Scottish Government through a VONC or by refusing to endorse the SNP pick for FM further down the line remains unclear.

Leadership Contest

A public spat over the direction of the SNP could be catastrophic at this stage in the election cycle. Many in the party are now looking to former leader John Swinney to avoid just that and try to go down

the route of having a single, unity candidate. The last contest was 52/48 between Humza Yousaf and Kate Forbes, so clearly there is division among members.

Below are the names to look out for in the forthcoming race:



John Swinney

The first candidate to confirm he is considering a run for FM is the former SNP leader.

As the volatility with the Greens became clear over the weekend, and rumours built that a leadership contest was imminent, many within the SNP have looked to Swinney to steady the ship. He has quickly become the front runner in the race as a unity candidate to avoid a public and divisive contest so close to a General Election.

Often referred to as a “safe pair of hands” – the SNP may look to this former Leader and Deputy First Minister to unite their own party and use his experience of working with the Greens to pass budgets in the last term as Finance Secretary.

We would expect a Swinney government to be a placeholder for the SNP while it rides the many storms ahead in 2024. There probably won't be too many changes to cabinet, though expect Forbes or some of her allies to be brought in. He may give prominent roles to future leadership candidates - like Mairi McAllan who is unlikely to enter this race as she is due to go on maternity leave in the summer – and to keep experienced allies like Shona Robison and Angus Robertson who help give the impression that the adults are back in charge.



Kate Forbes

Kate Forbes narrowly lost the last SNP leadership contest to Humza Yousaf last year. She is an economic liberal, socially conservative nationalist. A Kate Forbes administration would look very different to the SNP we've come to know in the last 17 years.

Forbes will not get the support of the Greens and it would be difficult for her government to pass a budget without major concessions to another opposition party. If the Scottish Government cannot pass a budget, there has to be an election, so her premiership doesn't provide the SNP with the stability they need, with the next budget due in December.

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Forbes could be a risk for Labour as she can match their growth and financial prosperity messaging, but she will place the SNP in a potentially uncomfortable footing with their core support group on social issues such as LGBT+ rights and abortion.

A Kate Forbes cabinet could include Michelle Thompspon and Ivan McKee, as well as bringing Fergus Ewing back into the fold, who was highly critical of the Greens.



Jenny Gilruth

Over the weekend, this unlikely name entered the discussion. The current Education Secretary, Jenny Gilruth does have some experience in a high-profile role and is well liked among the more progressive group of MSPs, but isn't thought to be a great performer in the Chamber and hasn't delivered any policies of note.

Gilruth has been MSP for Mid Fife and Glenrothes since 2016 and is the wife of former Scottish Labour Party leader Kezia Dugdale, so she would have an in-house prep team for FMQs, but hasn't proven her skills in this area so far.

Gilruth is close to Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Mairi Gougeon and we would expect her to play a key role in a Gilruth Cabinet.



Neil Gray

Neil Gray was first elected as the SNP MP for Airdrie and Shotts in 2015, in 2021, he switched to the Scottish Parliament seat, causing a by-election for Westminster won by the SNP MP Anum Qaisar. Many speculated at the time the move was with eyes on the leadership of the Party.

Following the resignation of Michael Matheson over data roaming charges this year, Gray was promoted to the prominent role of Health Secretary in a move many thought was to raise his profile for a leadership election. However, now the opportunity is here, his colleagues have been looking to others over the weekend with government insiders concluding that "he doesn't have it".

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