

Almost a decade after the high watermark of Scottish independence, the tide is going out on the nationalist vote.

It was 2007 when the Scottish Nationalist Party first took power in a devolved Scottish government, and 2014 when it secured — and lost — a historic referendum on breaking away from the rest of the U.K.

Support for the independence cause surged even higher in the aftermath of that vote, and many observers believed its eventual success was all but secure.

5 Yet the movement now faces an existential threat.

A recent Survation poll suggested the SNP could lose almost half the 48 seats it won at the 2019 Westminster election, with Labour picking up 24 — a dramatic improvement on opposition leader Keir Starmer's current total of one, and a major boost to his hopes of entering Downing Street at next year's general election.

10 And with the SNP mired in scandal and internal conflict following the departure of its long-time leader Nicola Sturgeon earlier this year, some sense the party's era of dominance in Scotland could be drawing to a close.

"When the tide moves, the tide moves," said Torcuil Crichton, Labour's candidate for the Na h-Eileanan an Iar islands, better known as the Outer Hebrides, far off the coast of western Scotland. "But it's not a light switch," he added. "It's a tidal wave and it takes some time to recede."

15 POLITICO spent a week traveling through Scotland to explore how much trouble the once-indomitable SNP could be in. The answer appears to be significant, with the nationalists having lost an all-powerful leader amid a police probe into party funding, and with other senior figures mired in factional infighting over proposed transgender policy reforms and the over-arching strategy for independence.

20 "The issue has become deprioritized," Labour's Shadow Scotland Secretary Ian Murray said in Stornoway, the de facto capital of the Outer Hebrides, when asked about pro-independence sentiment. "People have much more important things to think about."

If the 2014 referendum marked the high point for the SNP in Scotland, the general election in 2015, when it won every seat north of the border bar one, was the crest of its wave in Westminster. Its best showing in the Scottish parliament was in 2021, when it won 64 out of 129 seats — although it hasn't won an outright majority since 2011.

25 **Nevertheless, since suggestions of financial mismanagement emerged in late 2020, polls for the SNP have been in a downward spiral — made worse after Sturgeon resigned in February 2023, ahead of her arrest as part of the investigation into the party's finances. She maintains she has done nothing wrong and was without charge pending further policy investigation.**

30 Her successor Humza Yousaf has struggled to reverse SNP political fortunes, and it's become clear the movement — which counts dead people as one of its principle funding streams — is in financial turmoil.

But the SNP won't go down without a fight. As well as championing Scottish government changes, such as free drug prescriptions and free higher education, SNP senior members argued Scottish Labour MPs would be ignored in a Starmer administration.