



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Nicola Sturgeon's departure - intersection of the personal and the political



It is a privilege for a political leader to leave the stage when he or she decides to do so, without the pressure of a scandal or electoral defeat. That's why Nicola Sturgeon's departure has been a very rare situation.

That says a lot about the "brutality" of being a politician, as the former Scotland's First Minister said at her startling press conference in Edinburgh on Wednesday.

"Giving absolutely everything of yourself to this job is the only way to do it. The country deserves nothing less. But in truth that can only be done by anyone for so long. For me, it is now in danger of becoming too long", said Sturgeon.

There was much that was personal in her farewell speech – "I am a human being as well as a politician"... "My decision comes from a place of duty and of love".

Understandably, considering that for the last eight years as First Minister and another seven years before that as Deputy First Minister, she has left a big personal mark in politics in a very turbulent time.

Whether you were her supporter or not, one must admit that Sturgeon has shown decisive personal leadership in extraordinary political events, during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, or in the period when the decision was being made on whether the UK would remain in or withdraw from the EU.

"In the big challenging issues of the day she was one of the only UK leaders to come out of the Brexit debacle with any kind of credibility", said former SNP MP Stephen Gethins, now a Professor of Practice at the University of St Andrew's to Euronews.

Divisions are part of the inheritance

Sturgeon's greatest personal political legacy has been the Scottish independence movement, despite its setback in the 2014

referendum. "In the aftermath of the independence referendum, SNP membership surged", said Gethins.

However, a lot of personal in an unusually long period in the leadership position left great divisions in the political life of Scotland, including Sturgeon's SNP.

The Times' Hannah McGill, sees Sturgeon's departure as a relief. McGill said: "I once shared her beliefs, but the personality cult around Sturgeon chilled my blood".

"There's room to hope that this means an end to the sort of tribal signalling that Sturgeon favoured – the heavy messaging we've all endured that only people of certain views merit being listened to – and an acknowledgment that independent or not, Scotland is a broad church".

SNP plans on hold

Nicola Sturgeon's sudden departure will stop, at least for a while, the SNP's planned activities in relation to its number one political goal, the achievement of Scottish independence.

Stephen Flynn leader of the SNP in Westminster has argued that a special SNP conference, planned for next month, to discuss a plan to treat the next general elections as a de facto independence referendum, should be delayed at least until a new First Minister is elected.

"I think it's the right thing to take a breather. That conference should be paused," he told BBC's Breakfast. "We should allow our new leader the opportunity and the space to set out their vision, their priorities, domestically in relation to the NHS, the economy, the cost of living crisis but also give them the space to chart their course when it comes to that pathway to independence".

However, this break will be quite short, and it seems that the SNP do not want to leave much room for inflaming the divisions that Sturgeon left behind.

The SNP's National Executive Committee has decided that the election of Nicola Sturgeon's successor should be completed by March 27, that is, in six weeks, which is a shorter deadline for the election than it was in 2004.

A short race for the heir

In several surveys, Kate Forbes, MSP and the young SNP's finance and economy secretary, who is on maternity leave but has expressed ambition to enter the leadership race, has the best chance of succeeding Nicola Sturgeon.

Her advantage is slight compared to potential competitors, according to an Ipsos survey from February 16. Amongst 1,500 respondents, she has 31% support.

She is followed by Angus Robertson, MSP, the leader of the SNP in Westminster from 2007 to 2017 with 24% support, and Humza Yousaf, the youngest MSP at the time he was elected in 2011, with 20% support.

However, these are the first and early assessments of the candidates' chances, in a race that has just started and will surely change even more in the next six weeks.

The candidates will fight for their policies and visions for the leadership of Scotland, but that fight will inevitably be determined by Nicola Sturgeon's legacy.

The chances of success will also depend on whether the candidates treat that legacy as a continuation or, perhaps, as a discontinuation with the 3,000-day long mandate of the former First Minister.

Bearing in mind that they are replacing the person with the longest tenure as First Minister in the history of Scotland, the upcoming race will be more of a battle between policies than a clash of personalities.