

## Time for forestry to flourish, not flounder

As Members of the Scottish Parliament enjoy their summer break, it's a good time to reflect on May's election and what it means for the forestry and timber industry in Scotland.

Let's start with the obvious ones. The SNP remains the largest party, and will form the Scottish Government for the next five years, but fell short of an overall majority. This means the SNP will have to work with other smaller parties to get legislation passed. New legislation, strictly speaking, is not a necessity but what must be done every year is to pass a budget. So the SNP will have to work with others to ensure the business of government continues. Being in power since 2007, they have plenty of experience of that.

The opposition is, to put it bluntly, fractured. All parties other than the SNP ended up with fewer than 20 MSPs. Reform UK and Labour are the largest with 17 MSPs each followed by the Scottish Greens (15), Conservatives (12) and Liberal Democrats (10). Adding any of these groups to the SNP bloc gives a majority. So passing the budget should be possible, assuming the SNP can do deals. The Liberal Democrats have shown they are willing to work with nationalists in the recent past and there are of course the SNP's former coalition partners the Greens to fall back on.

At cabinet level, forestry comes under the remit of Gillian Martin MSP as Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs. Her supporting Minister with direct responsibility for forestry and woodlands, including Forestry and Land Scotland and Scottish Forestry, is Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands Jim Fairlie MSP. Both have previous experience in the Scottish Government and represent rural constituencies with significant forestry and timber interests. So, on paper at least, not the worst outcome for the sector.

The biggest issue at government/parliamentary levels will be renewal of the Scottish Forestry Strategy. The present iteration of this document runs from 2019 to 2029. Annoyingly for those of us that spend time monitoring progress against strategies, some of the key commitments in this strategy have been changed over time by other policy documents, most notably various statements from the Scottish Government on climate change action and increasing biodiversity. However the new strategy will be a chance to bring these together in one fresh document that will set out Scotland's approach to forestry until the 2040s.

So what's happened so far? Well the first announcement of note made by new Minister Fairlie was a set of new planting figures which he summed up succinctly - disappointing. Forestry industry professionals are (sadly) well-used to the annual UK planting statistics indicating targets have not been met. For politicians, not meeting their own targets is not unusual. Think of hospital waiting times, stopping small boats in the channel, or inflation.

What is different is the Scottish Government reaction to the statistics or the reaction from opposition parties. Whilst the new Minister made clear he was not thrilled with the figures, he did not announce any particular new initiatives to kick start planting or try and encourage fresh attempts to 'get planting done'.

The news release from Scottish Forestry - misleadingly titled Scotland leads the way on new

woodlands in the UK with a boost for native trees - acknowledged not everything was rosy in the forest and flagged up some administrative steps to improve matters. However, there was nothing in it that could be said to set the heather alight (metaphorically speaking, of course).

And the reaction from opposition parties to a Government Minister acknowledging that the Scottish Government has missed its own targets? Was there any? If there was, it's a case of blink and you miss it.

Why does this matter? Politics in the UK usually has the Government setting a policy course and the opposition parties criticising their approach and trying to keep them on track by keeping pressure on in Parliament. But on forestry and woodland policy in Scotland, we now have a strange situation where 2 of the largest groups in opposition - Reform UK and the Scottish Greens - are both for their own reasons largely opposed to commercial forestry expansion. The Scottish Conservatives tend to favour farming interests so are lukewarm at best about forestry. Labour is focused on urban Scotland to the extent they don't have an MSP representative on the new Rural Affairs Committee. That leaves the Liberal Democrats as the big hope for this session. They have picked up seats from the SNP with big forestry interests such as Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch but with their group doubling in size, they are still getting started and are not yet ready to push their own policy agenda as proactively as they might like.

The danger for the industry is that this lack of political interest continues. Business struggles for airtime in a Parliament more focused on the public and third sectors. Many MSPs have little experience of rural issues and represent urban areas where voters look to the countryside for leisure rather than a living. Their views - that the countryside should be for conservation rather than commerce - are well represented by wealthy organisations with significant lobbying power, such as the Woodland Trust and RSPB.

They found a receptive audience for the Royal Society of Edinburgh's February 2024 report on public funding for tree planting, which called for subsidies to shift away from commercial conifer planting towards native broadleaf woodland. The industry response was blunt: a rebuttal from the University of Aberdeen, commissioned by Confor, pointed out that the RSE's conclusions rested on an open online survey of just 45 respondents — a method known to attract people already critical of the subject — while a properly sampled 1,000-person survey commissioned by Forestry and Land Scotland found 90% of Scots in favour of expanding productive forestry. Whatever the merits of either side's case, it illustrates how easily a report with policy-shaping ambitions can gain traction with MSPs while its methodology goes largely unexamined.

So far the forestry and timber industry has managed to - mostly - keep the critics at bay assisted previously by a sympathetic Minister (Fergus Ewing MSP) who was responsible for forestry at the time the last Scottish Forestry Strategy was put in place and adopted. This time around, the picture is much more uncertain and this could have huge implications for the future of a sector which supports 34,000 jobs and is worth more than £1 billion to the Scottish economy.

The quote "Politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians" is widely attributed to former French President Charles de Gaulle. The forestry sector would be well-advised to

heed his words now and step up their political engagement to ensure Scotland's forestry flourishes rather than flounders in future.

*NB: This article was first published by Forestry Journal in July 2026.*

