

**Although regarded as an inevitability, Nicola Sturgeon's arrest is still shocking and unprecedented. One of the most formidable and highly regarded politicians in the UK until very recently, the former First Minister of Scotland is the third high-profile arrest as part of an investigation into financial misconduct by the Scottish National Party.**

On Sunday 11th June, Sturgeon was arrested and taken into custody where she was interviewed 'as a suspect' about claims her party had misspent donations. After 7 hours of questioning she was released without charge pending further questioning. The police investigation into this case began almost two years ago when complaints were made relating to more than £660,00 that was donated to the Scottish National Party(SNP) by activists. Police Scotland launched Operation Branchform to examine what happened to the funds.

Fundraising for a proposed second Scottish independence referendum by the SNP began in 2017. However, as a snap general election also took place that year, a Labour Party Member of the Scottish Parliament asked the Electoral Commission, an independent agency that regulates party and election finance, to investigate whether the SNP had spent this money on campaigning in the general election. The SNP denied this, saying the money raised was ring-fenced for a future referendum campaign. A second fundraiser in April 2019 also claimed to be ring-fencing donations for a specific purpose, saying "Our plan is to distribute An Independent Scotland... To achieve that, I am asking you to join me in making a donation to this specific project".

In October 2020, the Electoral Commission published the SNP's 2019 accounts showing that the SNP only had around £97,000, which was much less than the amount that was said to be ring-fenced. However, the SNP's then treasurer, Colin Beattie, said that there was £593,501 in the "Referendum Appeal Fund" that was ready to be deployed "instantaneously". On 20 March 2021, three members of the SNP's own Finance and Audit Committee resigned over a lack of access to party accounts and the police investigation was launched in July 2021 following seven complaints. It also emerged that Mr Murrell, Nicola Sturgeon's husband and Chief Executive Officer of the SNP at the time, gave a loan of more than £100,000 to the party to help it out with a "cash flow" issue after the last election and that the Electoral Commission had not been informed until over a year later, despite this being a breach of the Commission's reporting rules.

On 5th April this year, officers searched Ms Sturgeon's home and the SNP's headquarters in Edinburgh, with Mr Murrell being arrested before later being released without charge pending further investigation. A luxury motorhome worth about £110,000 was seized by police from outside the home of Mr Murrell's mother in Dunfermline and two weeks later, SNP treasurer Colin Beattie was also arrested and again released without charge. Ms Sturgeon, Mr Murrell and Mr Beattie were the three signatories on the SNP's accounts and the arrest of the former first minister had been widely expected.

This episode marks arguably the most spectacular fall from grace in the history of British politics. Nicola Sturgeon served as First Minister of Scotland and Leader of the SNP from 2014 to 2023, a nine-year stint in which she became the figurehead of the movement for Scotland's independence from the United Kingdom.

On 15 February 2023, Sturgeon announced her intention to resign as leader citing the demands of public life stating that the “brutality” of frontline politics accounted for her surprise decision and has denied the timing was influenced by the ongoing police investigation. She was succeeded by her health secretary, Humza Yousaf; however his narrow win and bitter contest exposed divisions within the party, which has dominated politics in Scotland for more than a decade.

Yousaf is now being called on to suspend Sturgeon from the party, however he refused to suspend Murrell and Beattie after they were arrested, on the grounds that neither had been charged or convicted. Sturgeon herself has declared her intention to return to the Scottish Parliament.

As this is an ongoing criminal investigation there is limited scope for commentators to speculate, which means many turn to predictions on the damage to Scotland’s independence movement, while the SNP’s political foes declare it a spent force and an end to the independence project. Although the SNP has reached new lows, the independence movement itself has maintained solid polling positions. Alba, the party founded by Alex Salmond, former SNP leader and Sturgeon’s mentor, has expressed the need to “insulate” the wider independence movement from the SNP’s problems.