Edinburgh's Only Independent Candidate 2016
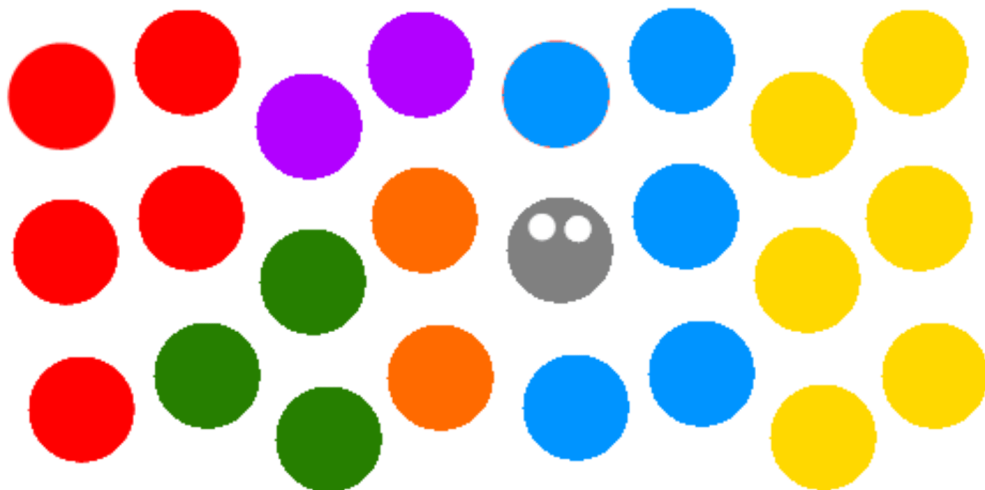
A campaign report on how to effectively stand as an independent candidate in Scotland.

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Introduction

My name's Jack Robert McLean Caldwell. When I was 22 years old, I stood the 2016 Scottish Parliamentary elections, I stood as an independent candidate in the Edinburgh Northern & Leith constituency. I've lived in social housing in Leith since 1998.

I have been the Technical Administration Assistant for a social enterprise for four years. During that time, I have participated and led in a manner of roles including looking after and upgrading the company IT equipment, set ups of audio and video equipment for clients hiring space (for anything from community anti-fracking events to Mental Health & Wellbeing Days, to film premieres), identifying criminality using our CCTV systems, running data cables to studios and maintaining our door entry systems. After my share of 12 hour shifts, I'm proud to be part of the working class.

I have been a fully qualified Cub-Scout Leader for six years, and have been through Scouts an additional four years of young leader training. My duties have involved everything from teaching children how to play the guitar, to organising and being the provisioned leader in charge of camps and nights away. Such responsibilities have earned me some high awards in Scouting.

Being diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome at age four and suffering from severe depression around the ages of 10 & 12, school was a challenge for me. I overcame this challenge and managed to pass my exams in 6th year at Trinity Academy, but at cost to my mental wellbeing. From that point on I vowed to fight for the children like me who had been disadvantaged by our overcrowded, hyperactive modern schools.

This report will reveal the backstory of how this campaign developed from improving higher education in our constituency, to developing stronger mental health services, to defending community assets such as the Prentice Centre and West Pilton Neighbourhood Centre from council and Scottish Government cuts.

More importantly, I hope this report will highlight the challenges of standing in an independent candidate in an urban area of post-referendum Scotland.

At 3.30am on May 6th 2016, it was announced that I had received 1,344 votes (or 3.6% share of the total votes), gaining a higher count than some Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates in neighbouring constituencies, and more than some larger parties did throughout the entire Lothians region.

This is how we got to that point.

The start

FIrst thing I decided to do was get a credible manifesto going, as I needed a central point that people could refer to what I stood for - after all, I couldn't possibly explain one-by-one to 65,000 people why I was standing, let alone why you should vote for me.
This was critical as it was the number one reason I never voted for an independent candidate in the past. Without an online presence, they could very well be an Orange Order creep, like the gentleman who kept harassing me on Twitter. For archival purposes, the manifesto can be viewed permenantly at **jackformsp.org.uk/manifestoes-policies**.

A major failure on my part as this point was assembling a formal team. I made the assumption that I could leaflet 65,000 houses myself, and still have time to knock on doors. This was a an oversight which at the end meant we could only get 9,700 leaflets out in total. Who knows how much better we could of done had we had roles assigned from the start.

> *LEARNING EXPERIENCE: Ensure you have a team around you from the start, calling in favours later in the campaign is suboptimal.*

Additionally, I didn't ask my "co-convenors" to take up that role until the campaign was in full swing. Having clearer defined roles for the co-convenors from the outset would've also been a more positive experience, especially if the co-convenors doing it on a purely voluntary basis.

The policies

Like most "true" independent candidates, I started off as a single issue candidate. That issue was changing the method of Scottish mental health service funding from "primary care" to it's own siloed funding method, and more broadly a better mental health service for Edinburgh Northern and Leith.

It quickly became apparent that that wasn't good enough. I was wanting a job that represented 65,000 people at the Scottish Parliament, some of whom haven't used or known anyone who used the mental health services. It wasn't good enough to go on stage and say "I don't know"

Voters aren't stupid and for the most part can disagree with a candidate on some issues, but endorse them to push other issues they believe in. My lack of opposition to the Faslane Nuclear Deterrence System ("Trident") was not popular at all, but other policies such as an emphasis on community funding & decision making and anti-fracking possibly helped people put their faith in me. Or vice versa.

Point is, don't fall into the "single issue candidate" trap, but still spearhead the main reason you're standing, or you'll quickly find yourself in the same niche as 'Iron Butterfly' or 'Living In A Box'.

With the launch of the website and the manifesto going by fairly quietly, we ploughed on to phase three… THE BRAND.

Branding

Looking back on the last independent to sit in the Scottish Parliament was revealing, most importantly how the late Margo MacDonald (Lothian) didn't just hold a name, but a brand. Whilst it was important to note that she made her name with the Scottish National Party (SNP), she was elected twice as an independent candidate, something so few people around the country can claim.

When you're stuck with a full name, rather than a company name, you need to be able to create a degree of flexibility in association with that name That's why I designed an emblem, as seen below.

The above emblem was actually designed in Microsoft Paint using simple vector shapes, and was chosen as the final copy as it was interpreted as a smiling face, a "J" and an anchor which represents North Edinburgh's port and fishing legacy.

Unfortunately for us, we couldn't have the emblem published on the voting slip as we weren't a registered political party, so used the emblem conservatively and even used it in conjunction with "JACK" on some literature.

The other learning experience for us was choosing a light blue backdrop with white text. At the time, we knew that people who are into politics would see the difference between us and the Scottish Conservative & Unionist Party, but that wouldn't have mattered on May 5th, where our A-boards looked fairly similar. Independent candidates should stick to grey, black and white. I can only imagine the headache choosing a nice purple would have given us. Alas, our anchor held in the sea of blue. Our rosettes ended up being a nice, eye catching black and white combination, which worked better than plain grey.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE: Stick with grey, black and white for campaign literature and web presence to be on the safe side. Being told to "@~&* off and die" by a man in a "I'm with Kezia" badge was a strange experience, and we're still not sure if it was directed at me or the Conservative Party stall a few feet away.

Literature & Distribution

A5 pamphlets can only tell so much, and no-one has time for a 7 page book of bumph. It's always worth considering that other parties are in people's consciousness for varying reasons, for example…

Party	(An example) first thought
Scottish National Party	Scottish independence & incumbent government
Scottish Conservatives Conservatives	Unionism and lower taxes
Scottish Labour	Workers and union rights
Scottish Liberal Democrats	Civil liberties
Scottish Green Party	Environmentalism
United Kingdom Independence Party	Euroscepticism
Independent	**...usually a single issue**

Although I had primary issues I wanted to see change in, I was not, by a long shot, a single-issue candidate. My manifesto was 32 pages long, and that needed reflected on a piece of paper around the size of a human hand.

We ended up using the designs below, with the first page created in Google Docs using the tables function and the second using layers in PaintDotNET. I thought five was the appropriate number of key points to get the message across without boring everyone to death. 10,000 copies were promptly ordered. Getting them out was a task that lasted from 1st February 2016 until the 4th May 2016, 10pm.

> *LEARNING EXPERIENCE: Wear a fitbit for the amount of stairs you have to climb. It can also be a fun fact to share with people on social media.*

Tenements were the biggest challenge to getting leaflets to due to intercom systems. I would recommend getting up early and taking advantage of the service buttons which usually allow you access between 9am - 11.15am, leaving the semi-detached houses until the afternoon. It's also worth pushing stairwell doors throughout the day on the off-chance that they don't lock are weren't shut properly. Generally, newer developments are more reliable to access and their buzzer systems are synced to open at sensible times, unlike Victorian-era flats where the systems are all open at different times despite being on the same street.

The number one rule for semi-detached housing is to treat the gates respectfully. Close them behind you and don't let them slam. Additionally, only walk on the designated pathways and don't climb over walls, no matter how small they appear.

The next page over contains a sample of the maps (in sectors) we used for distribution, using OpenStreetMap. The blue areas signal a property I personally visited.
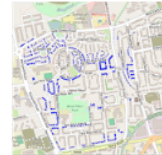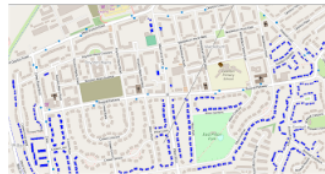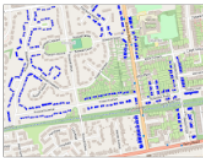
I personally visited the blue areas between late February and May. I did not commission any leafleting to be done by volunteers only. Not because I didn't trust the team, but I felt it's important to protect your team and give them corroboration. A member of the public tried to commit fraud by saying "my guys" smashed their door in and they were "sending me the bill". They did not respond to me when I verified I leafleted the street on my own. This was not a situation I was comfortable putting team members in.

Meeting people & social media

This was a core component. Meeting people and having a face to face discussion were worth ten times of any tweet. Nearing the end of the campaign, the team and I uploaded a list of meetings and events I had attended, which further highlights involvement in the community, and distances yourself from the type of politician that has their profile picture as them shouting into a megaphone.

Saying that, having a web and social media page is definitely integral, but should be considered 100% useless in measuring your impact. Again, having a centralised manifesto that was available 24/7 was the real bread and butter of the campaign.
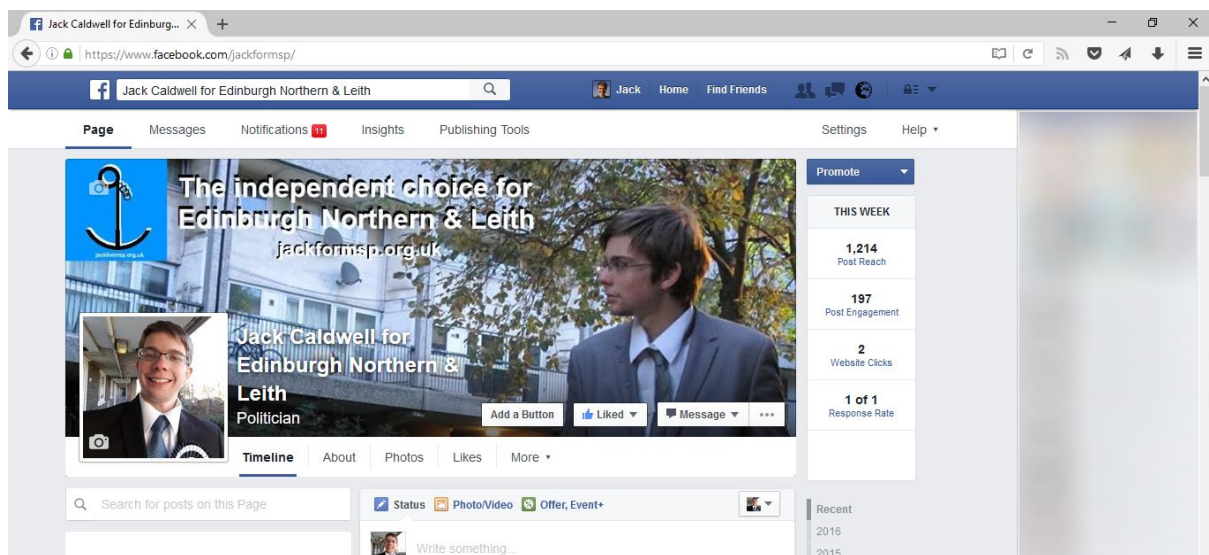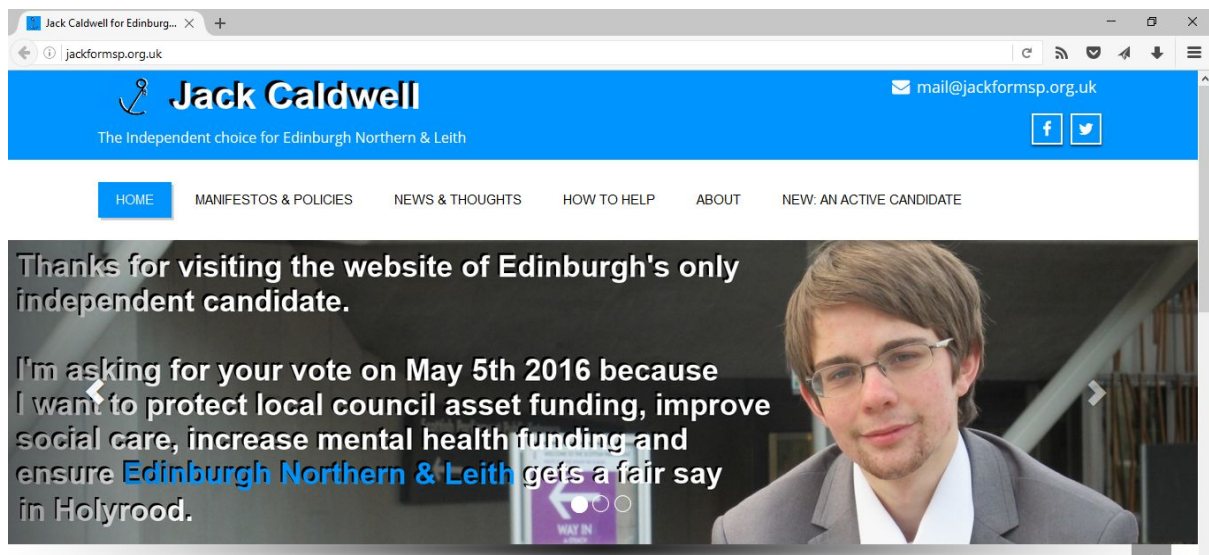
Tribalism and "the enemy"

Don't be fooled, politics is a dirty business, but we cannot fall for the tribalism presented on social media and in the news. The Leith Branch of the SNP, the Edinburgh North East Labour Party and the local Liberal Democrats and Conservatives are all full of very nice, intelligent people who made me feel welcome in their world, even when we were directly competing. The Scottish Greens (against whom I wasn't standing), were amazing too, and all of the party members and activists' professionalism made the democratic process a lot less needlessly dramatic than it could've been.

The electoral system and independent candidates

The system has been designed and incrementally updated with parties in mind. This should come as a shock to exactly no-one but is still a huge problem when you're going against parties that literally have a billboard on every street corner.

Small, incremental changes such as removing party emblems from ballot slips, or adding a standard "IND" text instead of a blank space would be start. Having any of the 25 print publications my manifestos were sent out to would also have helped dramatically.

Media-wise, it was very disheartening to see yet another article in a particular paper talk about someone running a marathon to raise awareness of autism when someone with autism who is standing as an independent candidate to defend mental health services gets a tiny footnote in a constituency profile.

The support that the electoral commision provided was excellent and I want to give everyone at the City of Edinburgh Council's Elections Team a huge thank you for all their effort which I believe really paid off in the form of a successful poll on the 5th May.

Recommended changes to make the system fairer for independent candidates

Remove the party logo from the constituency ballot paper

This is a clear example where registered political parties have an outright advantage. With the current design of voting ballots, independent candidates are subject to get missed, or "skimmed over" on the piece of paper. Custom graphics can dramatically change an undecided voter's mind, as many branding experts will back up.

Not only that, but not having an image makes a candidate look "weak" and "powerless" against much larger political titans, which in turn breeds a lack of trust or commitment to independent candidates.

Develop a real proportional representation system for constituency elections

Admittedly this affects "smaller" parties more than outright independents, a lot of independent candidates run for the regional (or "additional member") ballot because, in their own words, they "have a much better chance". I feel this is an inherent flaw in the system, especially when lesser-known candidates are likely the least able to campaign in a large region. Secondly, this leaves independent candidates who are concerned or want to represent local issues at a dilemma of whether they want a real chance to get into parliament and make change, or primarily stick to local awareness-raising.

In my experience, STV (Single Transferable Vote) is the fairest democratic system, and is currently implemented in local authority (council) elections across the country. The major benefit this would bring to independent and smaller parties would be people having more than one vote, meaning the electorate can freely choose as many candidates to represent them as they want, without not selecting the independent and smaller party candidates from fear that it won't make a difference. The evidence in this is in our current local authority figures. **localcouncillor.scot** figures estimate that one in six Scottish councillors are indepedent.

Overall, how did independents do in 2016?

Name	Area type	Area name	Votes
Beaumont, Deryck	Region	Central Scotland	460
Caldwell, Jack	Constituency	Edinburgh Northern & Leith	1,344
Campbell, Ronnie	Constituency	Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch	1,116
Creighton, Chris	Constituency	Glasgow Cathcart	501
Dawson, Paul	Constituency	Orkney	137
Finlay, Craig	Constituency	Perthshire South and Kinross-shire	544
Mccullagh, Andrew Louis Philip Stephen	Region	Glasgow	271
Meikle, Danny	Constituency	Clydesdale	1,332
Morton, Peter	Constituency	Renfrewshire North and West	198
Muir, Andrew	Constituency	Dumbarton	641
Muirhead, Tom	Constituency	Glasgow Kelvin	198

Why we will always need independents

People, not parties, are the most valuable asset Holyrood has. In the end of the day, it doesn't matter if your MSP is red or blue, as long as they represent you. Unfortunately, "independent member of parliament" has come to equate to "been suspended from their party". You only need to look at the 2016 House of Commons lineup of "independents" to see where this confirmation bias comes from. I believe independents can be the purest form of opposition to government. The party whip will always stand between a constituent and a representative when attending parliamentary business, which eventually leads to the parliamentary do-as-I- say culture of "political speak", when a politician blurts out a pre-prepared answer word-for-word when giving an interview. Because I can guarantee you candidates are more scared of the party whip than the media and public hearing their gaffe.

With crowdfunding websites making it easier than ever to build yourself a platform, now's the perfect time to stand as an independent candidate. You won't get "special treatment" from anyone, and you'll need to invest the time, but if there's particular issues you don't feel are getting a fair debate, stand up for them on the frontline.

At the very least, you'll raise awareness for them. In a rapidly developing world, issues can't just be left for established political parties to maybe put them in a manifesto.

A (very brief) history of independent politicians in Holyrood

Margo Macdonald is the name that springs to most politicos minds when the phrase "independent candidate" arises. This is partly because of her successful brand name she built due to her striking presence and ability to speak her mind freely. She was arguably the most successful Independent north of the border, but it shouldn't be forgotten that like many independent candidates, she entered parliament with a major party (SNP) and built her brand name there.

Parliamentary term	Independent seats	Minor party* seats
1999	1	2
2003	3	8
2007	1	2
2011	1	0
2016	0	0

"Minor parties", in this instance include parties which had no representation at Westminster when the election took place and includes the Scottish Greens (pre-2010), the Scottish Socialist Party and the Scottish Senior Citizens Party.

Dennis Canavan, another heavyweight name, also launched his political career with a major party (Labour), but laterally got elected to parliament on an independent ticket. Above is a table which compiles the "parliamentary makeup", and how Scotland has gradually moved towards the larger parties in terms of representation. This isn't inherently a good or bad thing, but does make us speculate the causes. One suggestion I have is the constitutional status of Scotland has been debated more since 2007 and larger party numbers matter in a two way battle such as unionism and nationalism.

Closing remarks

Thank you for reading this report of my experience and analysis on non-party politics in 2016. Please feel free to get in touch if you're standing as an independent candidate or wish to learn more from my experience. I feel it's very important that smaller parties and independents get support at least equal to some of Scotland's big brand parties. It's inevitable democracy will follow where the branding and money goes, and as you've seen, those without get no additional support in the current system.

At the same time, I hope that this document doesn't come across as anti-"big party". Parties that seek to make government are an integral part of any practical democracy, and I plan on joining one later down the road. Until then, I'm very interested in hearing your opinions or experiences of independent candidates, or my 2016 campaign in particular, so please get in touch using the methods below.

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