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Scotland

Scottish Socialists Face Up to Disappointing Result

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There is a time-honoured tradition in politics for parties who have suffered a setback to put on a brave face and to spin defeat into glorious victory. Last Thursday, five of Scotland's six parties had poor results.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/sspballot.jpg>]

Of these, only the SSP refused to put a gloss on a gloomy result. Convenor Colin Fox expressed our disappointment in colourful language by quoting the words of former Manchester United manager, Tommy Docherty: "We got beat four nil and were lucky to get the nil."

We had no illusions that this election would be anything but difficult. In the Scottish elections of 2003, and in the European election of 2004, every vote potentially counted towards the election of a Scottish Socialist MSP or MEP. But in this election we had no possibility of winning any seats - and made that clear to our supporters from day one. Nonetheless, the slippage in our share of the vote from 3 per cent in the last first-past-the-post general election in 2001 to 2 per cent in 2005 was disappointing. The result illustrates the magnitude of the task we face of building a mass socialist party capable of creating an independent socialist Scotland. It underlines the fact that we cannot expect linear progress forward and upward; reverses along the way are inevitable.

Difficult Period for SSP

There is no single explanation for this setback; it is the product of a complex combination of circumstances. The party itself has come through the most difficult period in its seven-year history. Following the resignation of Tommy Sheridan, we were subjected to a sustained media onslaught, mainly based on ignorance and misinformation. Nor has the party had time to fully establish the public profile of the new convenor, Colin Fox. But we also have to acknowledge that there were other, more powerful forces, working against us in this election.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/amakehistcap-2.jpg>]

Since the creation of the Holyrood parliament, Westminster elections have become increasingly hostile terrain for the three Scottish-based parties, the SNP, the Greens and the SSP. In 2001, that was partly disguised by the fact that the general election was a foregone conclusion from day one, with Labour's eventual landslide victory never in any serious doubt. In this election, Labour were able to whip up fear among working class voters of a Michael Howard victory. The Daily Record, for example, set out to scare the living daylights out of voters who might have been tempted to abandon Labour. "Today your house is in danger. So is your home, your pension and your kid's school," screeched the paper on Election Day, its front page depicting Michael Howard morphing into Margaret Thatcher.

An even bigger problem for the SSP, the SNP and the Greens was the emergence of the Liberal Democrats in the guise of a left opposition. They promised to tax the rich and scrap the Council Tax while portraying themselves as a progressive anti-war and anti-racist party, in stark contrast to the Tories and New Labour. In practice, the Lib Dems are a right-of-centre party. In Holyrood, they have opposed the abolition of warrant sales, voted down free school meals, supported privatisation and PFI, and failed, even after five years in coalition government, to move one millimetre towards scrapping the Council Tax. They oppose public ownership of the railways, support nuclear weapons on the Clyde and refuse to call for troops to be brought home from Iraq.

Perception is Everything

But in politics perception is everything. In a grand hoax that would have turned Darren Brown and David Blaine green with envy, the Lib Dems managed to create an illusion of an Old Labour-style reformist party. In this, they were assisted by uncritical blanket coverage in the UK media and by the inability of the big parties to tear away the mask.

Like the spectacular vote for the UK Independence Party in the 2004 European election, this Lib Dem breakthrough is unlikely to be consolidated into a permanent revival, especially in Scotland. In 2007, they will be fighting the Holyrood election, not as a critical opposition party, but as a governing party defending a dismal track record.

All other parties had a disappointing night in Scotland. As part of its UK-wide slump, Labour lost five seats and saw its vote fall by 4.5 per cent. The Tories - who won a majority of votes in England - failed to make any advance in Scotland and are stuck on 15 per cent with just one MP, even after eight years of Labour in power. After winning two seats, the SNP has projected an air of jubilation. But although the party has made local advances, it has suffered a further seeping away of support at national level. Despite the return of Alex Salmond, widely acknowledged as a strong, charismatic leader, the party received less than 18 per cent of the vote, 2.5 points down compared to the 2001 general election under John Swinney.

Voters' Priority: Stop the Tories

It would be a mistake to draw the conclusion that this represents a weakening of support for independence, any more than the losses suffered by the SSP signifies a backlash against the idea of socialism and wealth redistribution. Four polls conducted during the election running far higher than during the 2001 general election (ICM: 29 per cent; BBC: 33 per cent; YouGov: 34 per cent; System Three/TNS: 46 per cent). These polls also confirmed a long-standing pattern which shows support for independence by far the strongest among younger voters under 45, and among semi-skilled and unskilled workers. These figures underline the paradox that sympathy for independence is running way ahead of the combined support for Scotland's three pro-independence political parties.

But for all except the hard-core pro-independence voters, this was not seen as an election that could strike a blow at the future of the United Kingdom. Nor was it seen as an election that could deliver socialist change. Instead, most Scottish voters saw this as an election in which the main priority was to stop the Tories by voting Labour. Others, especially younger voters, saw it as an election in which the priority was to weaken New Labour's supremacy in Westminster by voting Lib Dem.

Scottish-based parties were marginalised by the British broadcast media, including the BBC, ITN, Channel Four and Radio One and Two, the smaller Scottish parties were doubly marginalised. The Scottish Greens and the SSP received virtually zero coverage, even from most of the Scottish media. At the start of the election campaign, the Greens talked of the possibility of Scotland's first Green MP, based on the strong vote they had received in Glasgow Kelvin and Edinburgh Central in last year's Euro elections. Instead their vote declined sharply, especially in their Edinburgh stronghold, where it fell from over 14,351 to 8,619. Across Scotland, the Green share of the vote was around 1 per cent, though they only stood in one third of Scotland. Taking into account the fact that the 19 seats targeted by the Greens were their strongest potential constituencies, it is likely that if they had stood across Scotland, they would have won around 2.5 per cent of the total vote.

Just as the poor result for the SNP does not signify a shift towards British unionism, neither does the vote for the Greens reflect a diminishing concern for the environment. Nor does the vote for the SSP reflect a shift to the right,

away from socialism and wealth redistribution. Based on this general election result, both the SSP and the Greens would be obliterated in the next Holyrood elections. But the 2007 elections will be fought on far more favourable terrain. In this election, all Scottish parties were reduced to their hard-core, bedrock support. Many people decided that, for this election only, they would transfer their vote to one of the big parties rather than "waste their vote" on their first choice party.

Differential turnout based on class

The SSP is also suffering from the continuing trend towards 'differential turnout' based on class. While middle class constituencies such as East Renfrewshire and East Dunbartonshire had turnouts of over 72 per cent, the turnout in some working class seats in Glasgow slumped well below 50 per cent. Within these seats, some wards had turnouts no higher than 25 per cent.

With the next national elections two years away, the SSP has time to assess its future electoral and campaigning strategy. For example, in the 2003 Scottish election, the SSP was the only party campaigning to scrap the Council Tax. Now the Lib Dems and SNP have jumped onto that bandwagon, after remaining silent on the issue for five years.

In the run up to 2007, the SSP will face the task of delineating itself more clearly from the other parties, not just in an abstract way, but on concrete policies that we can actively fight for. There is also an argument for at least discussing a more focused, targeted approach in future first-past-the-post elections, including the constituency elections for Holyrood.

In Scotland the SNP were able to defy the national trend in their six target seats by concentrating all of their firepower on these constituencies. The dramatic victory of George Galloway in Bethnal Green and Bow would not have been possible, even in this highly politicised constituency containing the largest Muslim population in the UK, without Respect pouring in big resources, canvassing every household and waging an intensive propaganda campaign on the ground.

In contrast, both the Greens, and especially the SSP spread our meagre resources thinly - across 58 seats, in the case of the SSP. This effectively prevented us from seriously countering the BBC, the ITN and the daily media. While the big three parties enjoyed saturation exposure in the media, the SSP was forced in most of Scotland to make do with our single A5 leaflet and a four-minute election broadcast. This was like trying to drown out the cacophony of a chanting football crowd with a tin whistle.

"SSP lives to fight another day"

Although this was a difficult election, the SSP lives to fight another day. Despite the fact that we have just come through the most difficult period in our seven-year existence, we were able to mount a national challenge in 58 seats from the Borders to the Northern Isles - where Orkney & Shetland candidate, John Aberdein, managed to increase the SSP vote to an impressive 5.6 per cent, our highest share of the vote nationally.

We distributed 3.2 million election addresses plus hundreds of thousands of street leaflets - and during the campaign received hundreds of applications to join the party. We now move onto new challenges, most immediately the G8 summit in Perthshire in July, which will provide the opportunity of taking our vision for Scotland and for the planet to a new generation of young people. Electorally, we now have a welcome two-year breathing space. And as convenor

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Colin Fox, pointed out after the count: "This Westminster election was an away game for us. Holyrood will be a home game, where we're playing to home fans."

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/mccombes3.jpg>]

- ▶ **This article will be published in the May 12th issue of the party's weekly newspaper, *Scottish Socialist Voice*.**