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Scotland

A sea change in Scottish politics

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Less than two years after the first elections to Holyrood, [1] Scottish politics has undergone a sea change. With a British general election on the horizon in a few weeks or months, Alan McCombes looks at present and probable future developments.

In a famous incident some years ago, an American sports commentator observed that "only an earthquake can stop the San Francisco 49ers now". A few moments later the stadium began to tremble violently and the game was hastily abandoned. Attempting to predict future political developments can be as hazardous as trying to forecast the result of sporting events. Even the outcome of the next general election, generally assumed to be a foregone conclusion, has occasionally been thrown into doubt by unexpected twists. For example, the fuel crisis in autumn 2000 for a time shattered the complacency of New Labour, exposing in the most dramatic fashion imaginable how rapidly the political climate can change. Having successfully weathered that particular storm, the government within three months found itself battenning down the hatches once again as the fall-out from the Peter Mandelson resignation scandal rained down.

Yet despite the potential landmines that are strewn in the government's path, the odds remain heavily stacked in favour of another Tory defeat and a second term of office for Blair.

Of decisive importance in Labour's strong showing in the polls over the past four years has been the strength of the UK economy. Back in 1997, when Labour first took power, it appeared likely that the new government would soon run aground on the rocks of a recession or slump. In the event, the Blair government managed to avoid the type of economic crisis that engulfed Major in the early 1990s, Thatcher in the early 1980s, and Callaghan in the mid 1970s.

This has not been as a result of adept economic management, as some pro-Labour economic journalists claim. Rather, the New Labour government has benefited from changes in the world economy that allowed the growth cycle to be prolonged beyond its normal life expectancy.

The New Labour government has also been bolstered by the crass ineffectiveness of the Tory opposition under Hague, who has failed to provide the inspirational leadership necessary to roll back the 1997 Labour landslide. Nor has Hague been capable of dispelling the bitter, lingering memories of the last Tory government.

Although Blair looks comfortably on course to win a second term of office, the atmosphere is now entirely different to that of 1997. At that stage, there was a certain air of desperation to get rid of the Tories. There were also widespread illusions in New Labour, particularly among pensioners, health service workers, local government employees and others who had borne the brunt of Thatcherism and Majorism. Four years on, that sense of hope has evaporated. In contrast to the euphoria of 1997, a Labour victory will be welcomed with a mixture of relief, indifference and cynicism.

Devolution

In Scotland, the mood is complicated further still by the national question. Those Labour leaders who imagined that devolution would resolve the problem of Scotland once and for all have been proven spectacularly wrong. Lord George Robertson in particular, now the boss of NATO, must qualify as the Ally McLeod [2] of Scottish politics for his prediction, when he was the Scottish Labour leader in 1997, that devolution would "kill separatism stone dead".

Initially, the establishment of a Scottish Parliament did partially defuse national tension. The delivery of a Scottish Parliament was held up in positive contrast to the pig-headed, bureaucratic intransigence of the previous Tory government. But less than two years later the flaws and anomalies of the devolution settlement are beginning to heighten national tension across the UK.

Tory ideologist Gerard Warner may not be the most sober or balanced of commentators. Nonetheless, when he says that "the realities of the devolution settlement are starting to generate the conflict that will end the United Kingdom" (Scotland on Sunday, January 28, 2001), he is reflecting growing unease at the highest levels of the British political establishment. Warner goes on to cite the example of David Davis, the Tory Chair of the House of Commons' public accounts committee who has called for Holyrood to be given control of income tax, customs and excise and between 66 per cent and 90 per cent of North Sea oil revenues. "When the Tory chairman of the most powerful parliamentary committee at Westminster recommends turning over oil revenues to the Scots, we know that the party is over," says Warner. "You can strip the blue segments out of the Union Flag now."

Another hard-line unionist, veteran Labour anti-devolutionist Tam Dalyell, recently denounced a proposal by the Scottish Executive to change its name to the Scottish Government as signifying "the end of the United Kingdom". Like Gerard Warner, Dalyell is prone to exaggerate the immediate dangers that confront the British establishment. Nonetheless, a series of recent conflicts between Edinburgh and London have exposed the inherent instability of devolution.

Concessions made by Holyrood over student tuition fees, teachers' pay and most notably, the rebellion over care for the elderly will be mercilessly exploited by the Tories in the coming general election. Inevitably, they will seek to whip up indignation over Scotland's higher share of public spending, and call for an end to the Barnett formula which enshrines this arrangement. The Tories have also begun to resurrect the old West Lothian question. [3] "Why should a Scottish Labour MP be allowed to vote against free elderly care in England - while their Holyrood colleagues back free elderly care in Scotland?" they ask.

Perhaps the most dangerous outcome of the next general election from the point of view of the ruling class would be the return of a Labour government dependent on Scottish and Welsh votes for its majority. If the Tories were to win in England but lose in Britain as a whole, the stage would then be set for a massive escalation of national conflict, with the Tories whipping up anti-Scottish and anti-Welsh hysteria at every turn.

Divergence

Any future conflict over the United Kingdom will not be a simple rerun of the battles that raged through the 1980s and early 1990s. Devolution has replaced the centralised Union as the new status quo. Not even the Tory Party would now dare call for a return to a centralised UK state.

People like Warner, who hanker for a return to the glorious days of Thatcher, are like those retired colonels who spend their last days dreaming of the restoration of the British empire. In the real world of Scotland and Wales in the 21st century, any suggestion by the Tory leadership that the devolution settlement should be scrapped in favour of a return to the unitary British state would consign the party to utter oblivion.

The terms of the debate have moved on. Paradoxically, instead of calling for a return to Thatcher-style centralisation, the Tory Party could begin to move in the opposition direction, towards a form of UK federalism, as flagged up by David Davis. This would mean retaining the trappings of the United Kingdom, especially in the fields of defence and foreign affairs, while compelling Scotland to stand on its own two feet financially. The idea of an English Parliament

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could also gain resonance among the Tory faithful, especially as the party begins to close the gap with Labour in England. Ironically, one reason why a section of the Tory Party may be prepared to move in the direction of devolving more power to Scotland and Wales is because they have politically written off both countries as a lost cause.

Writing in the London Times, political commentator, Peter Riddell, points out: "Scottish politics has always marched to a different beat, as Baroness Thatcher discovered to her frustration in the 1980s. Collectivism has deeper roots and Blairism has had less appeal north of the border except when coated in the traditional Labour language of Gordon Brown." He goes on to explain that "The Labour leadership in Scotland is also under pressure from the Left, both within the coalition from its Lib Dem partners and, more publicly, from the Scottish Nationalists, the Greens and the Scottish Socialists."

There is no question that, at this stage, the New Labour leadership feels secure in the knowledge that in England, its traditional support has nowhere else to go. But in Scotland, and to a certain extent also in Wales, the position is more complicated. In both countries, the main opposition to Labour comes from the nationalist Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales), both of which are to the left of Labour on issues such as trade union rights, nuclear disarmament, privatisation and defence of public services.

In Scotland, there is the additional ingredient of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) which will mount a national challenge across all 72 seats in the general election - a phenomenal achievement for a small, working-class party barely two years old. This stands in contrast, for example to the SNP which fought every seat in Scotland for the first time in 1974 - exactly 40 years after the party had been founded. The SSP still has a long way to go, but is already providing a focal point for the most militant, radical and politically conscious sections of the working class and youth.

In England, although there will be localised left challenges, especially via the Socialist Alliances, working class protest against New Labour will mainly take the form of large-scale abstentionism, along similar lines to the United States.

This coming general election is unlikely to usher in big changes, either in Scotland or in Britain as a whole. It is likely that Labour will hold power in Westminster with a reduced majority. In Scotland, both the Tories and the SNP will probably make some advances at the expense of Labour and the Liberal Democrats (liberal capitalist third party).

Meanwhile it is likely that the election will confirm the SSP as Scotland's fifth political party; and possibly even as the fourth party across most of the densely populated central belt. The election is almost certain to see the SSP achieve the biggest vote since the Second World War for a socialist party standing to the left of Labour. Never in its history did the Communist Party (CP) succeed in winning more than 25,000 votes in Scotland in a general election. Even in its glory years of 1945-50, when it had an MP in Fife and 20,000 members in Scotland - and was basking in the afterglow of the defeat of Hitler at the hands of the Red Army - the CP never broke through the one per cent barrier. Although it would be a tall order and would require over four per cent of the popular vote, it is not entirely ruled out that the SSP could even get the biggest socialist vote in Scottish electoral history by surpassing the 111,000 votes for the Independent Labour Party (ILP - left reformist party) in the 1935 general election, at a time when the ILP had four sitting MPs who had broken with Labour three years before.

However, the most important developments in Scottish politics are likely to take place in the period following the general election. For most of Scotland's political parties, the Westminster election is being viewed as a prelude to the much more serious electoral struggle that will unfold in two years time when the second elections to the Scottish Parliament take place.

2003

Over the past two years, the focus of politics in Scotland has shifted remorselessly from London to Scotland. The profile of Westminster MPs has plummeted since the Scottish Parliament was established. With all the bread and butter issues such as health, education, transport, housing and local government funding now being dealt with in Edinburgh, the media spotlight has increasingly centred upon Holyrood. This gravitational pull on the media has been further reinforced by the instability and volatility of the Scottish Parliament, where no single party commands an absolute majority. Scotland's political parties are already looking further ahead towards 2003, an election which even now is shaping up to become one of the most ferociously contested electoral battles in Scottish political history. For the ruling class, the stakes are already piling up. The SNP is in a far stronger position than at any time in its 70-year history. The party has 35 MSPs (Members of Scottish Parliament), with probably a handful of Westminster MPs after the general election. It also has one lethal advantage over Labour and the Liberal Democrats - the advantage of being in opposition.

Following the 1999 election, a right-wing Labourite from Wales, Tim Williams, made a telling point in the Scotsman: "For devolution to lead to independence, it was essential for the SNP to do well in the election, but not as well as to form a coalition government."

That election was conducted under extremely favourable conditions for Labour. The economy was growing. North Sea oil prices had slumped to almost an all-time low, thus undermining one of the central pillars of the SNP's economic case for independence. The bombing of Serbia - opposed by the SNP leadership - helped Labour bolster support for the Union. The parliament itself was completely new and untested; this meant that some voters who would generally support the aim of independence were prepared to first give devolution a try before proceeding any further. Yet despite all of these advantages, Labour was only able to muster the support of 34 per cent of the Scottish electorate in the second ballot.

The battle for Scotland in 2003 will be fought out on much more difficult terrain for Labour. The party's reputation in Scotland has taken a pounding over the past two years. Even in the relatively benign economic, social and industrial climate of the past two years, the ruling coalition at Holyrood has lurched from one crisis to another.

The slump in Labour's popularity probably won't be reflected in the arithmetic of the coming general election. The UK election will be seen by many voters as essentially a battle between Labour and the Tories, between Blair and Hague. Because of the pressure to keep the Tories out at Westminster, Labour may not lose too much ground in Scotland in this general election.

But the Scottish election in two years' time will be seen by working class voters as a struggle for the future of Scotland - a fight between independence and the status quo, between a right wing Labour Party and a left-leaning SNP. On top of that, there is the additional dimension of proportional representation and the prospect of further advances for the SSP and, probably to a lesser extent, for the Green Party.

Even now, some polls show the SSP running at 5-6 per cent with the Greens running at 3-4 per cent. Given that polls invariably underestimate support for small parties, and given also the big changes that are likely to unfold over the next few years, the combined support for both parties could potentially reach 15-20 per cent, which would almost certainly mean that pro-independence parties would command an absolute majority of votes and seats after 2003.

At this stage, there is no significant support within the SSP for the idea of entering a future coalition government with the SNP. On the other hand, if there was a hung parliament with the SSP holding the balance of power, this issue could become much more contentious within the SSP.

Now and in the future, Frontline will argue strongly against such a move. Although there are socialists within the SNP, the party itself is fully committed to a free market capitalist Scotland. Albeit in different circumstances, even the Liberal Democrats have discovered that sacrificing principles for the sake of short term gains can destroy a party's credibility. The SSP has a long-term project of building a socialist Scotland; but there are no shortcuts to that goal, and there is no possibility of smuggling socialism in the back door without winning a majority of the population to the idea of the socialist transformation of society.

Independence

On the other hand, that doesn't mean that the SSP should refuse to collaborate with the SNP and others on specific policies that could potentially advance the interests of the working class or further the cause of an independent socialist Scotland. For example, if the SNP were to emerge as the biggest party in 2003, they would almost certainly seek the backing of minority parties to introduce legislation for a referendum on independence. Even though the SSP's vision of a future independent Scotland is radically different from that of the SNP, the party should be prepared to back the demand for a referendum, in the course of which we would naturally make clear our distinctive programme for an independent socialist Scotland. It would be impossible at this point to predict the outcome of a future referendum. But whatever the short term ebbs and flows, there is now a clear, and possibly irreversible, long-term trend towards Scottish independence and the break-up of the United Kingdom.

The historian Norman Davies, author of *The Isles*, a scholarly history of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, makes the point that "the 300-year old British state is now in terminal decline." He points out that for an older generation the idea of being British meant standing up to Nazism, pride in the Royal Family, a welfare state and an NHS that was the envy of the world and a long, unbroken tradition of parliamentary democracy that contrasted sharply with most of Europe. But that sense of pride in Britain has gradually diminished over the generations. In 1999, a poll in the *Economist* magazine found that only one in five Scots - mainly pensioners - identify with Britain, while four in five identify with Scotland.

What processes could intervene to cut across or reverse this momentum towards independence? Some socialists who oppose independence have suggested that a rerun of the big all-Britain industrial battles of the past would tend to draw together the working class across Britain into a single cohesive force with a united class identity.

Certainly, movements such as the miners' strike of 1984-85 tended to marginalise the national question. On the other hand, there were other factors involved, notably the weakness of the SNP who only had two MPs at that stage - both right-wing traditionalists with little appeal to radicalised workers and youth. It should also be noted that the first serious electoral advances for the SNP took place during the late 1960s and especially the early to mid 1970s, during a period of bitter industrial conflict.

Moreover, there have been far-reaching changes in the structure of industry and the trade union movement over the past fifteen years or so. Most of the big nationalised industries which were the chief battlegrounds during the big all-Britain industrial battles of the 60s and 70s have now been privatised and broken up. For example, the rail industry is now a patchwork quilt of dozens of separate companies, each with their own separate bargaining structures. Complicating the picture further is the existence of the Scottish Parliament, which now negotiates wages and conditions in most public services, including local authorities. All of these changes together mean that the vast majority of Scotland's 650,000 trade unionists work for Scottish employers, including the Scottish Parliament, local government and Scottish companies such as Scotrail, Scottish Power, the Bank of Scotland, the Royal Bank of Scotland, and others.

During most of the 20th century, there was a trend towards the unification of the trade union movement on an all-Britain scale. In the 1920s there were more than 60 separate Scottish trade unions; by the 1980s only a few survived, notably the teachers' union, the EIS. This merging of the trade union movement reflected the growing integration of the British economy as a result of the concentration of capital on a British scale and the large-scale nationalisation of industries such as coal, rail, steel and shipbuilding.

But from the 1980s onwards, a combination of the general collapse of traditional British industry, the privatisation programme of the last Tory government and the creation of a devolved Scottish Parliament has led to a breaking down of the all-Britain employment structures that had prevailed from the 1940s onwards. This general shift was further complicated by globalisation, which has meant that, in manufacturing, for example, Scottish workers are as likely to be employed by a Japanese, Korean or American company as by a British company.

While there are important exceptions - for example the civil servants' union, the PCS, negotiates primarily at a British level - the changes are likely to lead to a loosening of the ties between trade unionists north and south of the border. In the future there could arise a powerful mood in certain unions in favour of much greater autonomy, especially if national bureaucracies begin to act as a brake on action by their members in Scotland. Instead of trying vainly to turn back the calendar, socialists have to be prepared to face up to the changes that are taking place. In particular, we should support moves towards increased autonomy for Scotland within unions such as UNISON, as part of the general struggle for greater rank and file control over the apparatus of the trade union movement.

That doesn't mean arguing for the break-up of the trade union movement along national lines; there are battles that still have to be fought at UK level, for example against the anti-trade union laws, and on issues such as the level of the national minimum wage. There will also be local struggles which will generate solidarity across the UK and internationally. But the general pattern of trade unionism is likely to alter in the future, reflecting the wider changes underway in society as a whole.

For socialists, the prospect of the rupture of the British state should be viewed as an opportunity to advance the cause of socialism rather than as an obstacle standing in our path. The national question is not a problem for the Left; it is a problem for the British ruling class. It would certainly become a serious problem for socialists, if Scottish nationalism were to take on a right wing xenophobic character. But the strength of the Left in Scotland means that is unlikely - unless the Left were to make the mistake of isolating itself from the most radical sections of the Scottish working class and youth by defending, or being perceived to defend, the United Kingdom.

Economy

How swiftly events move in Scotland, Britain and the rest of Europe will be partly dictated by economics. Over the past eight years, as part of a general economic upswing across the Western world, the Scottish economy has forged ahead. Official unemployment has fallen to a 25-year low. The figure for those in work has reached its highest level since 1966. Day in, day out economists jubilantly brandish new sets of statistics to demonstrate the robust health of the Scottish economy.

The real position is not quite so buoyant as the bare employment statistics suggest. Claimants today face a much more brutal regime than ever before. From the day they sign on, they are harassed and pressurised into the most menial and low paid jobs, whatever their qualifications or previous experience. A whole range of short-term training projects have been devised for the purpose of keeping people off the streets and reducing the unemployment statistics. Comparing the figures today with those of 25 years ago is like trying to compare the Brazilian football team with the All-Blacks; it is not to compare like with like.

Nonetheless, this period has been strikingly different from the economic ice age of the 1980s, when the Proclaimers [4] captured the sense of desolation across Scotland in their song "Letter to America": "Bathgate No More, Linwood No More, Lochaber No More."

There is no straightforward mechanical relationship between politics and economics. Since the turn of the millennium, for example, there has been a worldwide explosion of anti-capitalist protest, even against a background of continued economic progress. Instead of engendering a sense of universal optimism, this long upswing has generated mass revulsion, especially among younger people, against the free market and globalisation. In the past year, one of the biggest selling books worldwide has been Naomi Klein's No Logo, an onslaught against consumer capitalism.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to underestimate the difficulties that this boom has created for socialism. In Britain, the total transformation of the Labour Party into a pro-big business, pro-free market operation would have been far more difficult if economic conditions had been less favourable for capitalism.

That upswing has also left its imprint on the SNP. In the early 1990s, the party put forward what was, in effect, a left reformist programme, which included re-nationalisation of the privatised utilities. Although the SNP still stands to the left of Labour on a number of key issues, the economic programme of the party has shifted steadily to the right over the past decade, with all the earlier references to public ownership and re-nationalisation rooted out of its policy statements. In less prosperous times, the SNP leadership would have found it much more difficult to swing the party behind such a blatantly free market economic strategy. Right now there are storm clouds gathering on the horizon. In the US politicians and business leaders are beginning to brace themselves for a sharp slowdown or recession, which will have worldwide repercussions, not least for the UK economy. The Scottish economy, which is heavily geared towards the export market, would be especially hard-hit by a serious slowdown in the United States.

This in turn could have profound implications for Scotland in the run-up to the next Scottish parliamentary elections in 2003. Even now the success of the SSP, during a relatively stable period for capitalism in Scotland, is being observed closely by the political and media establishment.

In a full-page article in the New Statesman (January 29, 2001), former Scotsman editor and one-time adviser to Donald Dewar, Tim Luckhurst warns: "The SSP has become a real force, at least in Scotland's battleground central belt. Sheridan's tireless campaign for 'an independent, Socialist Scotland' can no longer be dismissed as an amusing diversion. The statistics prove it." Luckhurst then goes on to cite statistics showing the electoral advance of the SSP, which he compares with Ralph Nader (Green Party Presidential candidate in the recent US elections) and points out that, in contrast to New Labour and the SNP: "The Scottish Socialists sound authentic. In the parts of Scotland that prosperity left behind, the SSP has credibility. There are lots of parts like that."

Even now a significant and growing minority of people in Scotland identify with socialism. At this stage, Scotland is far in advance of the rest of the United Kingdom and, arguably, far in advance of most countries in Europe. The relative strength of socialism in this country is partly a product of Scotland's radical traditions, its recent history of struggle, and the overwhelmingly working-class social composition of Scotland. The national question has been an additional ingredient that has helped to heighten political consciousness in Scotland.

However, the specific role of the SSP over the past two years should not be underestimated. Politics is not dictated solely by uncontrollable economic and social processes. At certain stages in history, the role of political parties, even of personalities, can be decisive. The timing of the launch of the SSP and its activity over the past two years has helped shape public opinion in Scotland. The cumulative effect of the mass propaganda, the meetings, the election campaigns, the press statements and the written material of the party has been profound.

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Of course, it's necessary always to retain a sense of proportion. The SSP is still in its infancy. It has at its disposal a bare fraction of the resources of the mainstream parties. It is not on the brink of taking power. On the other hand if, as now seems likely, the economy begins to stagger into a new economic recession or slump with rising unemployment, diminishing tax revenues, escalating poverty, and an increasing strain on the welfare state, the forward march of socialism in Scotland could accelerate dramatically.

The International Socialist Movement, which publishes Frontline, has over the past few years played a vital role in establishing, building and politically developing a united socialist party in Scotland. We are 100 per cent committed to this project and, along with others, will continue to work tirelessly to turn the SSP into a mass party capable of transforming society in Scotland.

[1] The site of Scotland's devolved parliament in Edinburgh.

[2] The notoriously over-optimistic manager of the Scottish soccer team during its disastrous campaign in the 1978 World Cup.

[3] The "West Lothian" question was initially posed by the aforementioned Tam Dalyell - he argued that it was inequitable that he, as the Westminster MP for the Scottish seat of West Lothian, should have the right to vote on issues affecting England whereas MPs representing English constituencies would, under a devolved system, have no corresponding right to vote on Scottish issues.

[4] A left nationalist pop group.