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Scotland

The Scottish elections and the SSP

- IV Online magazine - 2007 - IV389 - May 2007 -

Publication date: Saturday 12 May 2007

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From the point of view of the radical Left in Western Europe, and beyond, the most striking thing about the 2007 Scottish parliamentary elections was the wiping out of the parliamentary representation of the anti-capitalist, socialist Left, and in particular the Scottish Socialist Party. This is a very serious defeat, not only for the left in Scotland, but for all those internationally who have seen the SSP as an example and as one of the pioneering organisations of the European Anti-capitalist Left. We will come back to that, but first of all it is necessary to look at the broader context of these elections, which also explain in part the defeat of the left.

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

These elections were a triumph for the Scottish National Party (SNP), which won 47 seats out of 129 (20 up on last time) to Labour's 46 (4 down). Any idea that they were essentially a defeat for Labour rather than a victory for the SNP does not resist an examination of the facts and figures. In a rather confused article in this week's Socialist Worker, Neil Davidson writes of "a serious desire on the part of voters to punish Labour for its many crimes". But later in the same article he notes that "the great majority of new SNP seats came from the smaller parties, not from Labour", which is much more relevant. In fact the Labour vote fell, in the constituency section, from 659,879 (34.6 per cent) in 2003 to 648,374 (32.2 per cent) in 2007. Hardly a severe punishment.

And in the regional lists it actually went up from 561,379 (29.3 per cent) in 2003 to 595,415 (29.2 per cent) in 2007. In fact the big drop in the Labour vote was between 1999 and 2003, when it lost 250,000 votes in the constituencies and nearly as many in the regions. The SNP on the other hand went up from 449,476 (23.8 per cent) in 2003 to 664,227 (32.9 per cent) in 2007 in the constituencies and from 399,659 (20.9 per cent) in the regional lists in 2003 to 633,401 (31 per cent) in 2007. That brings the SNP in votes to its level of 1999, though its percentage is higher because of an 8 per cent less turnout in 2007 compared to 1999.

So the main reason for the SNP's victory is that a lot more people voted for them in 2007 than in 2003, and those votes did not come from Labour to any significant extent. In fact there was a real polarisation between the nationalist vote and the unionist vote, and specifically between the SNP and the main unionist party, the Labour Party. Where did the SNP's extra votes come from? Well, Labour's coalition partner the LibDems lost 40,000 votes in the constituency section. Maybe some of those went to the SNP, probably not many. But the combined SSP, Green and Solidarity vote in the regional lists was 150,000 down on the SSP-Green vote in 2003 and since the SSP didn't stand this time in the constituencies, there were 117,000 votes looking for a home. Add in a 2.4 per cent increase in turnout, which perhaps favoured the SNP, and you start to make up the difference in the SNP vote between 2003 and 2007.

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

SSP convenor Colin Fox

There was of course in this election the scandal of, according to the BBC, 142,000 spoiled ballot papers, about 7 per cent of the total. This was due to the extremely complicated voting system and seems definitely to have damaged the smaller parties, probably not unintentionally. In particular it seems to have confused voters who wanted to vote one way in the regional lists and another in the constituencies. Who would those be? To a very large extent, those who voted SSP/Solidarity/Greens in the regions and SNP in the constituencies. Probably it wouldn't have had much effect on the result this time, nevertheless it has to be independently investigated and changed for the next elections.

So you have a situation where the of the three main unionist parties, the Labour vote held pretty steady, the Conservatives went up slightly, the LibDems down slightly. On the other hand the SNP went up to a very large extent

thanks to Green and Socialist voters who are pro-independence but well to the left of Alex Salmond. Why did they choose the SNP? Probably partly because of the party's position on issues like council tax, Trident, Iraq. And very probably because they thought an SNP victory would at least bring independence nearer. Because of the three parliamentary elections held since the Parliament was set up in 1999, this was the first one where the national question was well and truly at centre stage. Contrary to those who impressionistically approach the national question from the angle of the last by-election or opinion poll, beyond these ups and downs Scottish national consciousness has been steadily developing over the last 40 years, and its logical conclusion is independence. And not an independence in the abstract, but the desire of the Scottish to have control over their own affairs, their own national wealth and how it is distributed, issues like war and peace and nuclear bases on the Clyde. From that point of view, the SNP's campaign, concentrating less on independence and more on concrete issues, was quite intelligent. Because if there is not yet a solid majority for independence (the polls go up and down, sometimes there is over 50 per cent for independence) there is now a very solid majority for extending the powers of the Parliament.

So what happens now? It appears at the moment far from certain that the SNP will manage to have a coalition government with the LibDems and the Greens. So we are very possibly heading towards an SNP minority government. As Alan McCombes points out, that may be no bad thing for the SNP. It would avoid the kind of horse trading and shoddy compromises that coalition implies and the SNP could present itself as trying to apply its programme but being blocked by the three big unionist parties.

What might an SNP minority government do? Probably two things at once, as it did in the election campaign. On the one hand, he will give guarantees to the banks and big business that an SNP-run Scotland, or even an independent Scotland, will be good for them. During the election campaign the SNP proudly paraded the bankers and businessmen who supported it and revelled in the fat cheques they gave the party. So on basic economic policy, there is likely to be no significant change, no reversal of privatisations and private-public initiatives. On the other hand, Salmond will seek to consolidate and enlarge his base by engaging in confrontation with London on a series of issues – oil revenues, Trident, Scottish troops in Iraq, council tax - pushing autonomy to the limits, demonstrating that he cannot do this or that because of control from London.

This will open up a very interesting and eventful period in Scottish politics, and it makes the absence of socialist MSPs from Holyrood even more regrettable. For the SSP, to be absent from Parliament in the new political period that is opening is a severe defeat. It will also have financial consequences. But there is no other choice but to rebuild its influence. By engaging in extra-parliamentary campaigns and struggles as it has always done, but also by making its voice heard, which will now be more difficult from outside Parliament, on the central political questions that will arise.

So what happened to the SSP? As we have pointed out above, the left electorate got squeezed by the Labour-SNP polarisation. The Greens had no Sheridan affair, no damaging publicity, no split, and they still went down from 6.9 per cent to 4 per cent and from seven seats to two. Even without the Sheridan affair, the SSP would have had a hard fight on its hands, would perhaps have lost some of its six MSPs. But it is reasonable to think that it would have survived at least as well as the Greens.

But of course the SSP it fought these elections in very particular circumstances, less than a year after the Sheridan affair reached its apogee. In order to win a controversial case against a newspaper that had published details of his private life, Sheridan unleashed a public campaign of lies and slander against the leadership of the SSP, which continued before, during and after the case, which against all expectations he won. Having then failed miserably to win the support of a majority of SSP members, he split the party and created Solidarity, supported by the SWP and CWI factions.

The split was especially damaging because there was no way of explaining it by fundamental political differences.

There were problems in the SSP, mostly flowing from the difficulty of adjusting to the new situation after 2003 with six MSPs. The only way to avoid such problems is to stay small and marginal. Mistakes were made, there were differences, there was even an incipient left-right divide, with Sheridan and his ally Rosemary Byrne on the right. But that was not what caused the crisis and the split. What caused the split was Sheridan's ill-advised court case and his willingness first of all to lie and then to slander his party colleagues who would not lie for him, in order to win it. That was what was so destructive.

The SSP kept the bulk of the cadres of the party, and recovered from the split better than many people expected. It was much more visible on the streets than Solidarity. The SWP seems to have concentrated, up until the recent election campaign, on recovering its own public profile after five years in the SSP. Nevertheless, it is clear that the scandal and the split left strong traces on the electorate. That was predictable. What was not so predictable was the scale of the defeat – the SSP lost all its four MSPs and got 0.6 per cent of the vote. What was also not so predictable was that Solidarity would do significantly better, with 1.5 per cent, though it also lost its two MSPs. Clearly, in spite of everything, the name of Sheridan – the name he acquired as a public representative of the SSP and its predecessors, going back to the poll tax campaign – still attracted some of the socialist electorate.

The SSP will survive, it is politically solid enough to weather the storm, though hard times are coming and there will inevitably be some demoralisation. What of Solidarity? It is much less politically homogenous, above all on the national question. Sheridan and his allies still defend more or less the traditional position of the SSP. One is tempted to say that the SWP have no understanding of the national question in Scotland. But they do have one, developed in the writings of their main Scottish theorist, Neil Davidson, on the question. But it leads to them to underestimate the importance of the national question and to consider that the issue of independence is a "tactical question".

The *raison d'être* of this strange coalition was that only with Sheridan could they get elected. They were less wrong about this than many people thought, they were not so far off in Glasgow, but the gamble failed. But Solidarity is unlikely to last long enough to break up under the weight of its political contradictions. Between now and the end of the year Sheridan is likely to face court appearances which will expose the full extent of his lies and slander. Ironically, having used the courts and the bourgeois media to slander the SSP, he is likely to be brought down by those same courts and those same media. It is difficult to see Solidarity surviving that.

But the SSP will survive and though it will be a hard road back, it represents the only way to put socialism back on the agenda of Scottish politics. On the electoral level the chance may come sooner than expected. If the SNP does form a minority government, it is unlikely to last four years before new elections are called. But in the meantime, all those, in England, in Europe and beyond who have supported the SSP and who stood by it in last year's crisis, should more than ever stand by it now.