

Scotland after the British general election - "this is history"

Wednesday 3 June 2015, by [SMITH Murray](#) (Date first published: 1 June 2015).

The day after the May 7 election, George Kerevan, newly elected SNP MP for East Lothian, was walking through his constituency. He was approached by a group of young working-class women who recognized him, proudly declared that they had all voted SNP and wanted to take "selfies" with him. When Kerevan asked why, they replied "because this is history". They were of course right. The day before the SNP had taken 56 of the 59 seats in Scotland, leaving the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Labour with one each.

Comparing the election results in Scotland and England the phrase "two countries" frequently comes up. The pattern of voting in Scotland and England was indeed entirely different. In spite of the five per cent difference in votes (36 per cent Conservative, 31 per cent Labour only a handful of seats changed hands between Conservatives and Labour and the gains and losses cancelled each other out. The Conservatives won because enough of their bedrock vote stuck with them and did not go to UKIP, whereas UKIP damaged Labour more than Conservatives and the Lib Dems collapsed, largely to the benefit of the Conservatives.

The only common point in Scotland was the collapse of the LibDems, all but one of whose ten seats fell to the SNP. But the big, historic news was the utter rout of the Scottish Labour Party, which lost 40 of the 41 seats it had held. And in the vast majority of cases, not by a narrow margin. For example in Glasgow, where the SNP took all seven seats from Labour, it won an absolute majority in each of those constituencies, ranging from 52 to nearly 59 per cent; It was the same story in former Labour bastions like Coatbridge, Motherwell, Falkirk, Inverclyde and Gordon Brown's old seat in Kirkcaldy. There was across the country a massive shift of working-class voters from Labour to the SNP and the tendency was that the safer the Labour seat had been, the bigger the shift. The SNP probably also gained from the higher turnout in Scotland (71.1 per cent as against 66.1 for the UK as whole).

It can of course be pointed out that due to the well-known effects of first-past-the-post the SNP won 56 seats with just over 50 per cent of the vote. But Labour had benefited from the same system for many years. In 2010 it took over two-thirds of the seats with 42 per cent of the vote. The fact is that between 2010 and 2015 the SNP went from 20 to 50 per cent and Labour from 42 to 24.3 per cent.

Having been widely anticipated by the polls, the result was not a surprise, but it was at the upper end of the range of predictions. And looking around Edinburgh in the days before the election it seemed that if not everyone was wearing SNP badges or had their posters in their windows, there wasn't much visible sign of the other parties.

The reason for this massive shift clearly has its roots in the referendum campaign. As the campaign progressed, more and more Labour voters were being won over to independence. The four regions that voted Yes were predominantly Labour. The Labour Party did not simply campaign for a No vote. It conducted an extremely virulent and confrontational campaign, freely relying on the "fear factor",

playing on supposedly negative consequences of independence, some rather surreal and others quite effective, for example over pensions. Furthermore it did so in alliance with the Conservatives and LibDems, which gave the Yes campaign the chance to remind people how much Labour was part of the same neo-liberal consensus as its allies.

Unsurprisingly, on May 7 the SNP took the votes of the vast majority of those who had voted Yes, most of them from Labour. But it also took some No votes. The SNP campaign was centred on two ideas. First of all that they were the best party to defend Scotland's interests in Westminster, with the frequently repeated assurance that this election was not about independence. Secondly the SNP campaigned around opposition to austerity, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon making a considerable impact outside Scotland via the televised debates and forming a de facto alliance with Leanne Wood of Plaid Cymru and Natalie Bennett of the (English and Welsh) Greens.

Former Secretary of State for Scotland Alistair Carmichael, the sole LibDem MP left in Scotland, has come under considerable pressure to resign his Orkney and Shetland seat. He finally admitted being behind a story that Nicola Sturgeon had said to the French ambassador that she wanted a Tory victory, which was immediately denied not only by Sturgeon but by the Ambassador. So she clearly didn't say it – but did she think it? It is not hard to imagine how a Tory victory could help the cause of independence. But whether or not she and the SNP would secretly have preferred a Tory victory, they certainly weren't expecting it. Like everyone else, including David Cameron, they were counting on a hung Parliament and making plans accordingly. In their case, to give conditional support to a Labour government.

But of course that's not how things turned out. With what consequences for Scotland? In the medium- to long-term nothing could favour the cause of independence more than Scotland being condemned to five years of a Tory government with minimal support in Scotland: back to the period before 1997. But in the short term the new and unexpected situation may create some problems for the SNP. The perspective of propping up Labour, doing deals, being able to say they were "making a difference" by at least putting some checks on austerity could have been good for them. Now they are in opposition. Certainly as the third-biggest party at Westminster they will get to chair two parliamentary committees and ask the Prime Minister two questions every week. But they will not be able to influence Tory policies as they had hoped to influence Labour. Not in Parliament, anyway. This government will have to be fought outside Parliament, by mass action. It's not what the SNP do best. And there are others who do it better. Two countries, perhaps – but still one state. And the government of that state will be hell-bent on austerity, imposing it on a Scotland that never voted for it. All the parties and forces who situate themselves on the left of the political spectrum and who are pro-independence will have to respond to the new situation. They will have to combat the austerity issue by issue and at the same time seek to present a credible perspective that "another Scotland is possible", however each of them define that other Scotland.

Who are these forces? – essentially, the SNP, the Greens, the SSP and the nascent Scottish Left Project.

The SNP is not only the third political force at Westminster, it also makes up the government in Edinburgh. It will not only have to combat austerity on a UK level, it will also have to try and demonstrate that it can moderate its effects in Scotland. This may turn out to be complicated. Scotland is not about to see "devo max" – powers over everything but defence and foreign affairs. Broader devolution is being offered in the form of a new Scotland Bill based on the report of the Smith Commission set up after the referendum. As it stands it looks like a trap. The SNP is being offered wider powers, involving greater spending and responsibilities. But its ability to raise revenue is limited to taxing earned income, not savings or investment, in other words to taxing ordinary working people. It seems unlikely that this was unintended by the British government.

As Joyce McMillan pointed out in *The Scotsman* on May 2, the SNP has three choices: accept the proposals and try and make them work, a risky option; refuse to use the new powers and open themselves up to the charge of not using their powers to limit austerity; or take the debate onto another level by arguing that austerity cannot be ended by tinkering with devolution. In fact there are only two possible ways to save Scotland from austerity: either reverse it at UK level, or break from it in an independent Scotland. Many people in Scotland might conclude that the second solution is more realistic than the first.

In an article in the latest *Scottish Left Review*, Gregor Gall goes to some lengths to argue that the SNP is not a social-democratic party, as Nicola Sturgeon claims and as many believe. His criteria are not entirely convincing (for example his definition of social democracy includes nationalizing the banks, which was done in some countries, but not for example by the British Labour Party). However the use of the term is secondary. The point is that the SNP is and is perceived to be to the left of the Labour Party on many questions, something exemplified by free prescriptions, free health, which Labour oppose and would reverse if they ever came back to power in Edinburgh. That is why, in spite of criticisms that can be made of the SNP in government, its campaign against austerity was credible.

The SNP is certainly not a socialist party: it has absolutely no intention of going beyond capitalism. Nevertheless, the influx of new members since the referendum and even some of its new MPs may try to push the party to the left and may succeed to some extent.

The Scottish Greens are a different kettle of fish. They have succeeded in occupying at least part of the space to the left of the SNP. Their election campaign not only promised to end austerity and roll back welfare cuts, but to defend public services and renationalize the railways. One of the reasons cited for their opposition to the TTIP was that it would "lock-in" privatizations. In a campaign where there was huge pressure to vote for the SNP, they held their own, saving their deposits in a number of constituencies, particularly in Edinburgh – though their best result, over six per cent, was in one of the Glasgow seats.

The Greens, like the SNP, saw a flood of new members after the referendum campaign. So did the SSP. This was a welcome relief after what might reasonably be called the crossing of the desert after the crisis brought about by the Sheridan affair. Many young, working-class people have joined the party and this was reflected in its May 23 conference. It was all the more welcome that at that conference the party did not let success go to its head and think it could be the left alternative on its own. It voted to take part in the project of building a broad left alliance to stand candidates at the next Scottish parliamentary elections in spring 2016, a project the *Herald* newspaper has called the "Scottish Syriza". And the decision was important. Today the SSP alone cannot represent the left alternative in Scotland. But a broad left alliance without the SSP would be considerably weaker.

Apart from the SSP, any other left groups that are involved will be very small. This project will not be an alliance of parties. Among its initiators are people who played leading roles in the Radical Independence Campaign, Women for Independence and other grassroots campaigns and networks that made up the left wing of the Yes campaign, and the way those networks functioned will influence it strongly. It has also been supported by trade unionists, including veterans of the 1971 UCS sit-in, and a number of academics and writers, as well as by Myrto Tsakatika, a leading figure in Syriza Scotland. Its references are to parties in Europe like Syriza and Podemos.

There is clearly considerable potential for this left alliance in gestation. There is an audience in Scotland for a force representing a socialist challenge, defending direct participatory democracy, social ownership, redistribution of wealth and a break with the British state. And the road to those people was found during the referendum campaign by consistent work at the grassroots and by

initiating dialogue rather than talking down to people. That can be repeated not only on the electoral terrain but in the multiple forms of resistance to austerity that will manifest themselves in the coming period.

Murray Smith

P.S.

* From IVP. <http://internationalviewpoint.org/>