

Britain's elections: a debacle for Labour and an indictment of nationalism

by Socialist Equality Party
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Britain's Labour Party lost control of Scotland for the first time in half a century in what amounted to a string of reversals for Labour in regional elections Thursday, including for the Welsh Assembly and local authorities in England.

The results of the voting, however, were partially overshadowed by the debacle of tens of thousands of rejected ballots in Scotland.

The final results were delayed for hours, after counts in several areas were suspended due to problems with the electronic counting system. Things were made much worse by the widespread confusion created by the decision to use one joint form for regional list and constituency candidates for the Scottish parliament, known as the Holyrood, and the simultaneous holding of local council elections that used an entirely different system to register votes.

Estimates run as high as 100,000 rejected ballots—up to 10 percent of the overall vote. In some areas, the number of ballots rejected was higher than the vote securing the winning candidate's majority. By Friday evening, the Scottish National Party was claiming an "historic victory" as it took 47 seats to Labour's 46.

In England, counts were suspended in five areas piloting the new electronic counting system. The only difference between the situation in the UK and that in Florida in the 2000 US presidential election is that there is no evidence of deliberate political sabotage. What is common to both is that the incompetent conduct of the ballot is directly bound up with contempt for the electorate and the democratic process as a whole. The new technology has been introduced without sufficient preparation and the votes organised on the same day against all informed opinion.

In addition, there is significant anger over the postal ballots, which were not received in Scotland on time in many areas. This, too, is politically embarrassing, given that earlier elections gave rise to several scandals involving the use of postal ballots to rig the outcome. In England, many areas were not able to return final figures until late Friday because of new measures introduced to combat electoral fraud.

The picture that finally emerged is grim for the Labour government, which suffered significant losses from an already poor position. Though the largest party in Wales, Labour's

vote fell by 8.5 percent and it is 3 short of the 30 seats needed to form a majority. The Welsh nationalists, Plaid Cymru, have 3 more seats at 15, with the Conservatives securing 12 and the Liberal Democrats 6. Labour will only be able to form a government in Wales by building a coalition.

The same is true for the SNP in Scotland, which will need the support of two other parties to form a majority. Turnout was up to 60 percent, with the Conservatives winning 17 seats, the Liberal Democrats 16 and the Greens just 2.

The situation in England is just as bad for Labour. Social Exclusion Minister Hilary Armstrong said that, whereas the British people liked to give the establishment "a bit of a kicking every now and again...it doesn't look as bad as we might have expected," while Prime Minister Tony Blair declared that predictions of the party's rout had not materialised and that it had a "good springboard" to win the next general election.

This is whistling in the dark. Labour's projected national share of the vote is 27 percent, behind the Conservatives' 40 percent and almost the same as the Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives won 870 extra local council authority seats, and, though they made less headway in the north, if their vote is looked at in terms of General Election constituencies, they would have made more significant advances. If their results held firm, it would give them a majority government in the event of a general election, and party leader David Cameron has demanded that one is called following Blair's resignation.

This is a devastating indictment of the Labour government. The re-emergence of the Tories and the rise of the SNP are not an expression of the popularity of these parties, but of the fact that millions of working people in Labour's former heartlands have turned their backs on the party. At the same time, the Tories appear to have been reconnecting with those supporters they lost to Labour in 1997.

With opinion polls recording that opposition to the Iraq war was the major factor in many areas of the UK, Blair had earlier signalled that he intends to stand down as party leader within a week after the elections, in the hope that this will staunch the government's losses. But the results indicate that efforts to portray Chancellor Gordon Brown as a more "Old Labour" figure have had little impact.

As Blair's personal friend Martin Kettle noted somewhat cynically in the *Guardian*, "This has been a terrible election for Labour. There is no way that the support of 27% of the electorate—even if it creeps up to 28% or even a heady 29% by the time all the votes are counted—is anything other than lamentable...."

"Labour now retains power at Westminster but almost nowhere else of real significance. It has this power on the basis of 1935-vintage levels of support of around 30%. Ah, but after the low of 1935, the Labour tribalists will say, there eventually came the high of 1945—still the most iconic year in Labour mythology. With Gordon at the helm, surely things can be turned round now too. Yes, but it took a world war to put Labour in that position in 1945, and that's surely too high a price to pay for a Labour recovery."

One might add that Labour's 1945 victory was on the basis of a far-reaching programme of social and economic reforms and not on policies that place it to the right of the Conservative Party on many issues.

What is equally noteworthy about the elections is the absence of any political tendency that gives even partial expression to the anti-militarist and left-wing sentiments that have produced these losses for Labour.

In Wales, Labour's difficulties hardly benefited any of the other official parties. In particular, Plaid Cymru was not seen by working people as a viable alternative to the government, and there is broad mistrust of its profession to represent "decentralised socialism." Over the next weeks, some working alliance will have to be established between the various parties, either as a fixed coalition or an agreement on an issue-by-issue basis.

In Scotland, the losses suffered by Labour would undoubtedly have been greater had not the main opposition party been the pro-business SNP.

The SNP had insisted that the election was a referendum on independence—a claim that was enthusiastically endorsed by all those tendencies that portray themselves as a left alternative to Labour and the SNP: Tommy Sheridan's Solidarity, the Scottish Socialist Party and the Greens.

This only threw a lifeline to Labour, which cynically manipulated widespread opposition to Scottish separatism to portray itself as the guardian of the "Union." This was reflected in the election-day headline of the pro-Labour *Daily Record*:

"Today's election is *not* about war in Iraq. It is *not* about Tony Blair.... Do *not* sleepwalk into independence. Do *not* let a protest vote break up Britain."

Equally criminal was the cultivation of illusions in the SNP and the perspective of nationalism by organisations professing to be socialist. Both Solidarity and the SSP richly deserve the losses they suffered as a result. Before their unprincipled split eight months ago, the SSP had six MSPs in Holyrood. This time, neither party stood in the constituency elections—leaving

the field clear to the SNP. Both urged a vote for pro-independence parties, without specifically mentioning the SNP. As far as their former supporters were concerned, this was not necessary. The message was received loud and clear. Most of those who previously voted SSP switched directly to the SNP. Both parties lost all their seats as their vote collapsed.

A balance sheet of the SSP and its Sheridan-led breakaway confirms that they are nothing more than an antechamber to the party of Alex Salmond.

The Socialist Equality Party secured 292 votes in South Wales Central and 139 in the West of Scotland. In both regions there were at least three larger nominally socialist parties standing. Of these, Solidarity, the SSP and Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party stood in every region and were allotted TV election broadcasts. In addition, Sheridan and, to a lesser extent, the SSP were given significant daily media coverage. In contrast, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has reported, even where the SEP campaign was mentioned, its name was changed and its policies misrepresented.

Anyone who voted for the SEP did so consciously and based on an agreement with its opposition to militarism and war and for the building of a genuinely socialist party based on internationalism. The SEP was the only party on the left that did not portray national separatism as a way forward and insisted on the unity of working people in Britain with their brothers and sisters in Europe and worldwide.

In just four weeks, our party mounted an energetic and ambitious campaign—selling thousands of election manifestos. Our work was directed at clarifying the essential political issues confronting workers and youth. For this reason, we are especially proud to have hosted lectures in Glasgow and Cardiff Universities by WSWs Editorial Board Chairman David North opposing the historical falsification of the life and thought of Leon Trotsky.

The warning we made that opposition to the Labour government could not be based on the promulgation of nationalism and calls for limited reforms administered through Holyrood and the Cardiff assembly has been vindicated. In the coming period, the SEP intends to conduct systematic work in consolidating the advances we have made, particularly in establishing chapters of the International Students for Social Equality. Above all, we will continue to focus on the essential issues of political education and the elaboration of the perspective required for the development of a political movement of working people against the capitalist profit system.

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