

Election 2007

Oh, what to do?



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Comment election 2007-a dilemma for the left

Forget what you have been told about the Scottish elections, because it is largely wrong. The establishment wisdom is that we have a normal parliament (big, centrist parties) with a bit of pollution (smaller parties and independents). This is nonsense. We have a centre-left parliament which the democratic will is trying to drag further to the left. If we trace this democratic will over the last two elections we would be able to guess what will happen in the coming one – were it not for ‘factors’. Let’s have a look at this.

We all know that representative democracy is only representative and only democratic in a certain sense. We all get an opportunity to express an opinion but only in the vaguest of ways. We have to choose not the thing we want but the thing on offer which is closest to what we want. Many other people make similar choices without much thought about what they want. And what we end up with is a group of people who are largely chosen because people thought they were ‘a bit better than the other ones’. But this truth gets obscured within minutes, when the group of people chosen take their mark of democratic legitimacy as an inarguable case for unchecked power. So far, so obvious – we’ve been used to this forever with Britain’s first-past-the-post democracy being a particularly brutal example.

In Scotland we have something better, at least in as far as the choice of ‘who’s closest’ is wider and the end result less distant from the actual election process. We can vote in a way which make elected dictatorship much less likely and can elect people who will not form government but will help to shape or constrain what government can do. Proportional representation gives us a better democracy, even if that is a relative measure. But it does mean something else, particularly for those of us on the left. It has meant that, quite the opposite of a Westminster setup in which successive elections have become more and more identikit, every Scottish election has been markedly

different, the one now upon us equally so. Let us consider the differences.

In 1999 the first election to the Scottish Parliament was an unknown entity. We knew some things. First of all, we knew that the four big parties would be campaigning for a share of government and not for government itself. Secondly we knew that the artificial gaps between parties produced by first-past-the-post would be gone which would one way or another change the political map. Thirdly we had a real possibility of electing some MSPs from smaller parties or who were standing as independents. But the ‘we’ here really meant the political hacks and these things were not necessarily widely understood by those voting. So we had something like the equivalent of a new machine which those working it didn’t yet understand.

And there is some reason to believe that this is exactly the outcome we got. We got a big disillusioned vote away from Labour, but it followed the old electoral routes and ended up with ‘the biggest party which is closer to what we think than the one against which we are protesting’. So the SNP did very well in the first Scottish election and picked up a large number of seats on the list. There is very good reason to believe that this was a shift of traditional Labour voters who were uncomfortable with the direction Blair was taking the party nationally and that the SNP’s ‘Penny for Scotland’ policy was a beacon which attracted that vote. Meanwhile, there were some other people new to the machine who took the ‘here’s a new button – I wonder what happens if I press that’ approach. Thus there was a respectable enough vote for the Greens and the SSP (the case of Dennis Canavan as an independent was not a result of the new electoral system but to the autocratic way Labour selected its candidates for 1999).

So the 1999-2003 Parliament might best be thought of as a slight mutation of a Scottish Westminster election – recognisably

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the same but with enough variation to know something was different. The difference was a closeness of the parties with Labour needing to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats to govern and with the SNP much closer than it would have been through the old electoral system. The coalition government was seen as the factor of this Parliament which was distinctive and different, but then this is what one might expect from those doing the seeing. In fact, the idea that coalition government is remarkably different to what happens at Westminster is overstated. Yes, there had to be negotiations over policy priorities before a government could be put together and yes there were a number of issues over which Lib/Lab negotiations were tense. But how different is this really to Westminster? Was the Lib/Lab Executive more divided in itself than John Major's Tory administration? Is argument between cabinet members from different parties any more fraught than argument between cabinet members from the same party? Actually, once in power the Executive was comparatively disciplined and looked more united than Westminster administrations of the past (oh, how little we can remember from before the Blair era...) I would argue that the more distinctive feature was the three outsiders – Tommy Sheridan, Robin Harper and Dennis Canavan. It was a major shift for people to be shown that voting for something other than the big parties was not necessarily a waster vote.

In practice, the 'meaning' of the first four years was difficult to assess, given how much of it was about bedding in. However, the effect of the Liberal Democrats was significant – where it was different from the Westminster system was that the Lib Dems needed some 'big wins' and got them in the shape of tuition fee abolition and free care for the elderly. (It is interesting that much of the Labour case for re-election this time round is built on previous delivery of things they wouldn't have delivered had they had a free hand.) But, whatever your view of him, the effect Tommy Sheridan had was significant (much more so than the other two). The ability to stand up and make speeches which a Labour MSP would have found hard to get by the whips put all sorts of pressure on the bigger parties. Pressure from the left – unknown elsewhere in UK politics – forced the Executive to act on things like warrant sales and school meals. That it might have to protect its left flank is something on which the Labour Party has seldom needed to dwell.

The effect on the second election was clearly noticeable. Forget what some people will tell you about the smaller parties and the protest vote, the election of a significant non-big-four block was not an accident or a reflex reaction. In 1999, as I have suggested, a number of more adventurous voters tries pressing the new buttons on the new machine. And what happened is that the button popped out something pretty close to what they were looking for. The button works! In 2003 the people who wanted something more progressive were shown in no uncertain terms that there was an option.

This made the 2003 election very different from the 1999 one. There are all sorts of reasons for this; the SNP was viewed to have been a bit of a disappointment, the Lib Dems were shown to be able to achieve outcomes (don't underestimate the significance of that change), the Greens and the SP were seen as real and viable political options, the scope for independents and other alternative parties became more obvious. Oh, and the media-adored notion of a right-wing populism being failed by the Tories and waiting to breakthrough in the shape of the Scottish People's Alliance was exposed for what it was – a wish harboured by a right-of-centre establishment which wanted to believe that Scotland was secretly a conservative country and based on nothing.

Disregard most of what you are told about the outcome of the 2003 election, because most of it is wrong. Firstly, the large SSP/Green vote was not a protest vote. In fact, good evidence exists to prove that in fact of all the votes cast in 2003 the ones most closely linked to the intentions of the voter were the ones cast for the smaller parties. This evidence relies on also disregarding the notion that the SNP 'collapse' was a result of lack-lustre leadership. In fact, if you watch what happened over those two elections the more convincing interpretation is based around the migration of a solid block of voters who were committed to a policy programme clearly to the left of the Labour Party. The SNP did well in 1999 and badly in 2003. Labour (compared to pre-1999 voting patterns) did badly in 1999. The SSP and the Greens did well in 2003. This can all be accounted for by voters who wanted to find a policy platform to the left of Labour. In 1999 the Pavlovian effect of a lifetime of first-past-the-post elections meant that those voters left Labour for the SNP and

its 'Old Labour' pledge to raise taxes to invest in public services. In 2003 the white noise created on the political scene by Tommy Sheridan and the presence of small parties caused those voters to move again, this time realising that voting for the SSP and the Greens could deliver exactly what they wanted.

This left vote in Scotland has been like a cat in a kitchen, tipping over different containers while looking for what it wants. The election of the non-big-four MSPs in 2003 was an eloquent expression of the will of many Scottish people. The rejection of the Scottish People's Alliance shows little expression of the same desire on the right. That is not the perceived wisdom – the big parties have tried hard to isolate or emasculate the smaller parties, the media has done the establishment bidding (a disgraceful number of 'objective' journalists use the epithet 'far left' for parties no further left of centre than the Tories are right of centre – can you imagine the same journalists talking about the Tories as the 'far right'?) and the analysts have been much too like mice in a cage, running round the same old pre-devolution wheels apparently among the last people to notice that Scotland is no longer a mutated version of Westminster but is something else in itself.

And then we have 2007. What is one to think? The Labour situation is daily more bi-polar – Scottish Labour (or large parts of it both in the party and among its voters) look south in disbelief as the Blair agenda becomes more extreme. It is also caught up in a complex constitutional position – not in terms of policy but in terms of presentation. The new establishment in Scottish Labour largely comes from a Scottish Labour Action background and is not entirely comfortable with Nat-bashing where it becomes Scot-bashing. And yet this is what it must do. However, the real problem for Labour in relation to the left vote is that in government it has been competent enough and has done some good things but in terms of social transformation it has been far, far too cautious. Scottish Labour is not Westminster Labour and doesn't push policies which will result in creationism being taught in schools (for example) but it has meekly gone along with creating public infrastructure owned for profit by big business (for example). Scotland is probably a bit better as a country after eight years of Labour, but for social progressives it won't be seen as enough. Labour is more problem than solution for this constituency.

It is what happens beyond this that is confusing verging on exasperating. It is clearly the case that the SNP offers a policy agenda which is to the left of Scottish Labour. It is no good to say that foreign and defence policy is reserved; Labour MSPs have been craven and cowardly in their attempts not to embarrass a national leader so far out of touch with national and world opinion that he looks unhinged. The SNP has been effectively and consistently anti-war and must be given respect for providing an important focus for dissent in recent years. Equally, the SNP social policies are consistently to the left of Labour, with support for free school meals, a local income tax, opposition to PFI and a number of other stances putting clear red water between them and Labour. Many on the left have been far from impressed with the SNP's attempt to remake itself in the mould of a thrusting pro-business party which seems most proud of its low-business-tax credentials, but this is at least

not much worse than the others. So the SNP provides a good centre-left option. It also has two other factors going for it just now. In Salmod the SNP has a more persuasive leadership candidate than any of the others, and it has a credibility it hasn't had probably at any time in its history. The SNP really looks to many like it could just about win.

For the left the Labour establishment in Scotland has become like any establishment in power too long – reactionary rather than progressive – and the opportunity to break up and challenge that establishment creates opportunities which are too good to pass up. A change of government would create a change in Scottish society, and for the period of time before a new establishment created itself there would be some period of flux in which things might really be possible. At the same time the possibility of independence beckons welcomingly to many on the left who just can't see how the UK will ever do the right thing so

long as it remains dominated by big lobby groups (the arms industry, American foreign and trade policy, the smash-and-grab capitalists of the City of London). Independence is a long way from certain, and that an independent Scotland would follow a Scandinavian model is equally uncertain. Still, the possibility looks attractive, especially in relation to the alternatives (in the next decade we can expect some sort of Brown-Cameron-Miliband regime in Westminster).

This left vote in Scotland has been like a cat in a kitchen, tipping over different containers while looking for what it wants

So many will think that perhaps the best bet is to take the offer on the table and hold noses over some of the SNP position. The alternatives are not brilliant this time round. The Liberal Democrats have been seen by many as a way to 'liberalise' a more centralist tendency in Labour. If Labour is going to be in power, goes the argument, we might as well at least keep them in check with some Lib Dem help. But the Lib Dems have two problems. Firstly they have been government for too long to be persuasive as 'alternative'. And even more than that, the Lib Dems look to be styling themselves as increasingly 'New Labour' as a new leadership follows a strategy based on received wisdom rather than Scottish political reality (chose a centrist pro-business party, any centrist pro-business party).

But the main reason that many will see the SNP as the best bet comes down to a set of circumstances which can (nominal) be traced back to a simple question of sexual infidelity. Or not. As we have discussed, one of the most invigorating elements of the Parliament has been a block of left-wing votes in the Parliament, independent of the whips of the big parties. That they have been attacked and pursued as vigorously as they have (by the other parties and the media) is precisely the sign of the effect they have in keeping up the pressure and forcing MSPs and parties who would otherwise be increasingly 'proud' of their rightwards drift (as in Westminster) to keep proving their left credentials. Along with a much more effective 'calling to account' than is to be found in Westminster, the Greens and the SSP have been really very effective. The position of the Greens should remain strong, especially in areas where they are able to siphon off some of the disillusioned centrist votes. The polls have been mixed, but then the polls have been wrong about the smaller parties on a fairly consistent basis. However, the complete reliance of the Greens on second votes poses problems. A shift in who wins the constituency seats could result in a significantly different

distribution of list seats. This could work in favour of the Greens (for example if the SNP take more constituency seats) or it could work against them (if there is a more even split of votes, the threshold for getting representation can rise). The Edinburgh Pentlands situation highlights the problem – if the Tories win, the Greens get a list seat; if Labour wins, they probably don't. Nevertheless, on a pan-Scotland basis, one would expect to see a healthy return of Greens.

It is the split in the SSP that causes many people the biggest problem. It is pointless to run over the whats and whys of the split – it doesn't change anything. What is clear is that there are plenty of reasons floating about for not voting for one or the other. These boil down to two basic positions. The first is that the overblown personality cult of one party member was overtaking the wider aims of the movement and his subsequent desire to split that movement is all the evidence needed to reject the breakaway. The second is that the unseemly and overwhelming bitterness of a small group of party members towards easily the most influential member of the party has destroyed an effect movement and left it so internally divided that a fresh start was necessary. So yes, there is a reason not to vote SSP and there is a reason not to vote Solidarity. Unfortunately, these reasons will of course be spread fairly evenly and we therefore we have two halves of a bottle incapable of containing anything. The experience from inside the two parties seems to be of entrenched loathing – completely divorced from the experience from outside the parties which is largely ambivalent. Many people on the left want one socialist option to vote for which will help break up the parliamentary monopoly of the big parties. Most of them care nothing for the personal enmity of the protagonists. But now there is no sensible bet. Everyone expects the vote to split and no-one can think of a way to use their vote effectively. Some will

make a point about Tommy, some will make a point about the Tommy-haters, other will play safe and vote SNP, others will play unsafe and go for other options such as the Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party while many may go Green.

Which is sort of where we started. Election Number Three would probably have been more like Election Number Two if the experience of what can be achieved was consistent. To return to the machine analogy, realising that the SSP button worked, many people would have pressed it. But this time they know that the button won't work the same way so they don't know what to do. They think 'perhaps this time round it would be best just to overthrow Labour so I might vote SNP'. Or they think 'I want a counter to the big parties so best to vote Green'. Or some variation. Many left-of-centre voters in Scotland will vote Labour or Liberal Democrat. Some of the Labour ones will move this time, probably to the SNP. This will be a big shift. But it is the restless cat in the kitchen which may decide this election. If it chooses to play safe and stick its paw into the SNP jar, we could have a giant change. Or we could have very little change. If it chooses to take a chance on something else, we could have another big change. Or we might actually go backwards. And the galling thing is that the cat isn't a single entity. It is thousands of people, and none of them can be sure what the others will do. This election will now be as much of a mystery as the last two. But when you are told that (a) decreased numbers of those from small left parties proves that the voters have rejected socialism or (b) the SNP breakthrough shows that people are happy with the establishment, the people telling you it will be every bit as wrong as they have been for the last eight years.

Good luck – there is little more we at the SLR can offer you than that. ■



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briefing: what's the difference?

The party manifestos are not yet published but we can already see where the dividing lines between the parties lie.

The manifestos haven't been published, but we can already see the differences in policy of the political parties in Scotland. The views and opinions here are taken from public statements and might not necessarily be the policies that feature in parties' manifestoes.

Education

Education, education, education. This issue has dominated electioneering but so far we've had more promise than policy. All parties want to reduce class sizes. Jack McConnell has pledged to make Scotland's education system the best in the world by 2020. He claims that he will do this by creating new Skills Academies, establish literacy and numeracy tests, introduce more modern languages and science into our primary schools and we will change the law so that every 16 and 17 year old participates in full time education or training. Similarly, the Lib Dems want more teacher training places to deliver more teachers and sports coaches. They want to tackle discipline by giving more powers and support for teachers. The SNP have focused more on nursery education. They are calling for a 50 per cent increase in free nursery education, access to a nursery teacher for all, free fruit in schools, health and fitness checks for our youngsters in school, a pilot of free school meals for P1 to P3.

Health

The SNP will protect vital local health services, give the public a say in decisions on the future of local hospitals and do more to give young Scots the healthiest start in life. The Lib Dems want more nurses and more community health centres. SSP have a campaign to abolish prescription charges.

Business

The SNP and the

Conservatives and the Lib Dems have a similar line on this. They all support a cut in business rates and more support for small and medium sized business.

Law and order

The parties stance on this issue is pretty similar with all parties singing the mantra 'we need to be tough on crime'. But if you look at little deeper there are differences.

The Conservatives policy is 'three strikes and your out' for repeat offenders which basically means more jail. The Lib Dems want to tackle the ineffectiveness of short prison sentences. This is part of their proposal for radical reforms of the prison system, replacing the Scottish Prison Service with a Custody and Rehabilitation Service that actively works to cut reoffending. They also want tougher sentences on knife crime. Labour want to double the number of community wardens, retain DNA samples of all suspects to catch criminals elsewhere in the UK and

Constitution

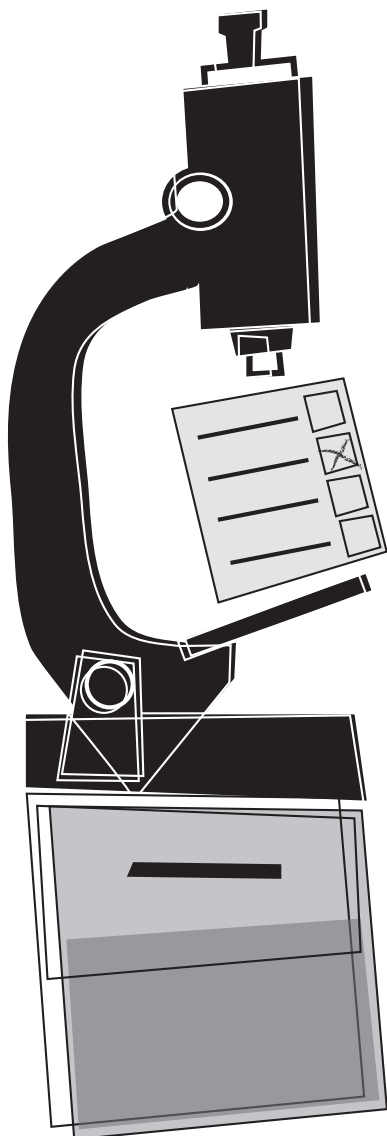
SNP, SSP, Greens and Solidarity want an independent Scotland. Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives would like to maintain the union in basically the same structure that it has already but the Lid Dems for example want more power for the Parliament.

Environment

All the parties support the use of renewable energy and they have suggested various ways to combat climate change. There is a pretty clear distinction between the parties on this issue. The Greens, SNP, SSP and Solidarity all support the use of renewable energy and say no nuclear power. The Lib Dems have also given this issue prominence and call on new targets for renewable energy including 100 per cent by 2050; increased energy efficiency in the public and private sector and a £200 local taxes rebate for households that fit micropower. Labour also wants micro-renewables in more homes. On cutting congestion the SNP oppose road pricing and the SSP and Solidarity basically want the same thing. SSP want free public transport for all and Solidarity want to re nationalise the railways

Nuclear weapons

The SNP, Solidarity, SSP and the Greens are opposed to the use of nuclear weapons. The Lib Dems are less decisive on this point, but the Westminster party agreed on a policy to cut nuclear arsenal in half and start disarmament talks. Jack McConnell has called for a full debate into the renewal of trident but he simply can't and won't take a different policy from London. ■



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vote for us

We asked someone from each of the left-of-centre parties (and an independent) to set out a case for why a Scottish Left Review reader should vote for them

Bill Butler, Labour and Co-operative MSP for Glasgow Anniesland.

As a socialist I believe that the central concern of any progressive party must be the elimination of poverty. A serious political programme must have as its fundamental objective the breaking down of class barriers, not a fixation with the issue of national borders. The policy priorities of the Scottish Labour Party for the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary Election have been formulated in partnership with the Party's industrial wing; the trade union movement. The result is an agenda rooted in the realities of the lives of working men and women, and which reflects the everyday priorities of Scotland's citizens.

Education provides a means to enable all of our country's people to develop their innate talents. I believe that Scottish Labour is right to focus on education; helping people to reach their full potential will create a climate of lifelong learning which will benefit individuals and build a strong economy upon which to establish an egalitarian society. Labour will extend nursery provision to vulnerable two-year-olds and review the Surestart scheme, with a view to extending it. We will invest in the training and qualifications of those working in nurseries. Labour will also improve the quality and accessibility of innovative childcare and will expand the number of subsidised places in breakfast and

after-school
clubs to help
achieve this.
we will

clubs to help
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looked
after, but will
encourage new
skills, healthy
lifestyles and
provide help
with homework.
At primary level,
Labour will initiate a
significant shift in the
which are taught from
age, with a new focus on
and science. Critically,

subjects
an early
languages
we will

introduce specialist teachers to support classroom teachers in these new subjects.

Of course, such innovations in education, as in other policy areas, must be built upon a sound economic base. At the moment Scotland's unemployment is lower than the rest of the UK and amongst the lowest in Europe. However, there is more to do. One of Labour's key policies will be the creation of a full employment agency the aim of which will be to get 100,000 more Scots back into work. I welcome this commitment to full employment. In tandem with this pledge, a Labour government will work to spread the benefits of economic prosperity more widely. Central to this will be tackling the problem of young people leaving school who don't move into education, training or employment.

Labour has given a commitment to establish Skills Academies in every part of Scotland, offering young people from the age of 14 the chance to pursue challenging vocational subjects. We will make leaving school at the ages of 16 and 17 conditional on a young person being in education, employment, training or full time volunteering, supporting this with an expansion of Project Scotland. This will allow more young people to make a contribution to society, while creating opportunities and gaining experience for themselves.

Achieving sustainable growth in the economy is the prerequisite for the more democratic, more socialised society all progressives want to see. I look forward to a Labour government at Holyrood which continues to recognise the vital part played by the public sector in meeting that objective. For example, one of the key commitments contained within the Labour Party policy document agreed at the recent Oban conference in relation to the NHS is illustrative of that forward looking approach - there will be a clear presumption on the expiry of existing hospital cleaning contracts that there is to be a resumption of in-house services.

The Scottish Labour Party is committed to supporting economic growth through continued investment in transport. Labour is committed to progressing the Glasgow Crossrail project, and I look forward, as Convenor of the Scottish Parliament's Cross Party Group on Glasgow Crossrail, to that policy pledge being implemented in the next parliamentary diet as it will play a central role in the modernisation of Scotland's rail network, and will bring nationwide economic benefits.

Bevan once famously said to a Labour Party conference during the period of the first and most radical majority Labour government that "the language of priorities is the religion of Socialism". That approach remains as appropriate today as it was in 1949. The Scottish Labour Party, if re-elected on May 3rd, would continue to put in place policies which, in the fields of economic development, health, education, transport, culture, the environment, and the prevention of crime, would mirror the priorities and realise the aspirations of the working people of Scotland. On that basis, I believe that a vote for Scottish Labour on May 3rd would be a vote to build a better Scotland.

Michael Matheson MSP, SNP - Central Scotland

On May 3rd the choice facing the people of Scotland is straightforward. Do we accept the present state of devolution, accepting that forever we are to remain a powerless and marginal province of the British state, or do we embrace the opportunity of moving forward as a nation on our own? I believe that more and more people in Scotland recognise the real potential we have as an independent nation and that it is time to regain our national sovereignty. There is a mood change in Scotland on its views of independence, which is demonstrated by the failure of New Labour's relentlessly negative scaremongering campaign against the SNP.

The failure of the British Union was brought home by the recent official statistics on child poverty, which lay bare its failure to protect some of the most vulnerable in our society. About 130,000 (13 per cent) of children are living in "absolute poverty" and 240,000 (23 per cent) are living in "relative poverty" in Scotland today. In 1968 only 10 per cent of children were living in relative poverty. The situation has got considerably worse in the last 40 years. The level of child poverty in Scotland is up to ten times greater than in European countries of a small size, such as Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland. According to a 2005 UNICEF report, Denmark and Finland have child poverty rates of 2.4 per cent and 2.8 per cent respectively. Given that we have far greater natural resources than either of these countries, it is a clear indicator of how badly Scotland is faring under the union with Westminster.

At a time when so many of our children are living in poverty, the Westminster government has committed itself to renewing its own weapons of mass destruction on the Clyde, at a minimum cost of £76 billion. The decision to replace Trident comes with a heavy 'opportunity cost'. Scotland's pro-rata share of that expenditure will be £6.46 billion. The opportunity costs of replacement are dramatic and clear; the effect of a renewed Trident program will be to reject the pressing need to invest in the priorities of our nation's people, such as schools and hospitals, doctors and nurses.

Our public services have continued to be undermined by this New Labour government in a similar fashion as they were by the Tories. A good example of this is through their obsession with PFI/PPP. The SNP will end the expensive PFI/PPP programme being pushed through by New Labour, which has resulted in the funding of capital projects in a way that has led to the Scottish taxpayer being robbed of hundreds of millions of pounds, while public sector workers have their jobs privatised. Replacing PFI/PPP with a system of bonds to fund schools and hospitals in the future would save the Scottish taxpayer and ensure the ownership of public assets remain within the public sector.

The important value of our public sector is often overlooked by this government and we need to ensure that we continue to invest in good quality public services both at a local and national level. The SNP is committed to doing just that, ensuring we have good public services from the cradle to the grave. The SNP is the only party that can bring an end to New Labour rule in Scotland. As an independent nation we will be able to be a nation that prioritises people rather than weapons of mass destruction, and end the ongoing involvement of our forces in an illegal war and will put people before profit in our public services.

It's time to take our nation forward.

Robert Brown MSP, Scottish Liberal Democrats Policy Convener

What ought to be the characteristics of left of centre politics? Liberal Democrats would suggest these should include:

a belief in the innate worth of people, and in the future – in progress and reform;

support for individual and human rights of all citizens;

a passionate concern about those left behind by the system – particularly children and young people;

the importance of community and community power, of the voluntary sector;

Long term investment in good public services accessible to all;

Building resilience and wellbeing in all our citizens;

A sustainable human and geographical landscape, where the huge challenge of climate change is focused and acted on;

An entrepreneurial society which enhances opportunity and creates the wealth needed for key social purposes.

In fact, only the Liberal Democrats offer this unique brand of politics. Labour is deficient in at least half of these aims, which is why many of the key achievements of the Scottish Parliament have been down to the Liberal Democrats – the abolition of tuition fees which was New Labour's tax on education; free eye and dental checks; the introduction of free personal care for the elderly; a raft of reforms opening up government like the Freedom of Information Act and the Scottish Human Rights Commission.

I believe that the Scottish Liberal Democrats programme for the forthcoming Parliament should appeal strongly to progressive radicals and reformers across Scotland. First will be the priority we will give to education and young people. We will support and encourage young people, not constantly grieve at them and about them. We have well developed programmes to focus on the early years, and to greatly increase the opportunities young people have to play, to communicate, to learn and to build confidence and skills. We will empower young people and will bring forward a "Future of Scotland Bill" to guarantee a positive role for young people, and to give young people the power and influence to get things done for their own lives and their own communities. We want schools and other facilities providing interesting options for children, both in school and out of school – in sport, arts, music and the rest. We will also recruit yet more teachers to maintain the 53,000 level we will achieve next year.

The second task is to tackle climate change. We want to see Scotland become the renewable energy powerhouse of Europe. Microrenewables in particular have huge potential – for wind turbines or solar panels on schools, factories, hospital and houses. Indeed, by 2050 the Liberal Democrats want all of Scotland's electricity to be generated from renewable sources – 100 per cent clean electricity in the lifetime of our children. Thirdly we need to tackle the growing challenge of investing in affordable housing. Fourthly, we will take steps to reinvigorate local communities. We are proposing 100 new community health centres to guarantee quicker and more local diagnosis and treatment. One thousand extra community police officers, a right in local communities to run local services themselves,

But more important than the detailed policies is the vision. What our Leader, Nicol Stephen, described as "the power to dream and the purpose to deliver". I believe we can inspire and engage young people in our democracy – many of who turned out on the March against war in Iraq and the Anti Poverty March. This is the biggest challenge and I hold to the view that only the Liberal Democrats can do it. We are a party that can lead Scotland.

So choose a bright future for Scotland. Choose the Liberal Democrats.

Mark Ballard is a Green MSP for the Lothians and Maggie Chapman is the Green candidate for the Edinburgh Council ward of Leith Walk

The forthcoming elections in May provide all of us with the opportunity to show our deep dissatisfaction with the relentless prioritisation of individualism and profit over community and justice. And when thinking about justice there has to be the recognition that it is not possible to make a choice between social justice and environmental justice; the two are completely intertwined. Having acknowledged this, the Scottish Green Party has always understood politics to be more than what might be seen as traditional environmentalist politics, it is a politics that is about the synthesis of people and the environments the people inhabit. There is deep and careful consideration (and often rejection) of many policies within the major parties because of the personal effects and implications they have, which disable people from fulfilling their individual potentials as well and prevent them from caring for the planet. The following are just some of the reasons that a vote for the Scottish Green Party is a vote for a social and environmental justice, a justice that will enable people to live happier and healthier lives at the same time as show consideration for the world which we all share.

Greens reject the doom laden politics of neo-liberalism, and seek to forge a new political path away from the Washington Consensus. This means resisting commodification and marketisation that pervades neo-liberal economy and society. A Green politics is a politics that decisively rejects Thatcherite economic determinism.

In the past four years, Green MSPs have shown through action that they are committed to defending civil liberties. The Scottish Green Party has led the fight against rendition flights, against forced deportations, against Dungavel Detention centre, against ID cards and against the demonisation of our youth.

The Greens have fought to ensure that environmental justice is at the centre of the political agenda. By highlighting the plight of the people of Greengairs in North Lanarkshire – whose lives are blighted by Western Europe's largest landfill site – Greens have ensured that New Labour's weasel words on the environment do not go unforgotten. Environmental justice and social justice must go hand in hand; only by addressing the shocking environmental injustices faced by the people of Scotland's poorest communities can we create a society based on social justice.

The Scottish Green Party has a comprehensive suite of policies on public ownership and workers rights. The PCS commended the Scottish Green Party's policy on trade union recognition and workers rights as the most comprehensive of any Scottish political party. The Greens will campaign to oppose regressive privatisation measures and will seek to reverse the botched privatisation of the railways. We will also fight against the

privatisation of Scottish Water and creeping privatisation through PFI/PPP. If we are serious about harnessing the potential of Scotland's renewable energy we must have a publicly controlled and publicly accountable national grid.

Greens offer socialists the opportunity to vote for a party that may have the opportunity to deliver on its beliefs after the election. If in a position to do so, Greens will ensure that there is no new nuclear power in Scotland. Greens will also put pressure on the Scottish Executive to do everything in its power to prevent nuclear weapons being based in Scotland.

The Scottish Green Party is convinced that healthy and happy communities will lead to a socially just Scotland. To this end, the Greens pledge to ensure that all children get decent, well-balanced meals at school, regardless of family income. Greens will also continue to campaign for free tertiary education, ensuring that educational aspirations are not inhibited by unfair tuition fees and debt.

The Green Party offers Scottish citizens a real opportunity to make a difference to our nation's future, by nurturing and encouraging our young people, supporting our workers, caring for the elderly, and not compromising the planet. A vote for the Greens is a vote for social and environmental justice.

Colin Fox MSP, Scottish Socialist Party National Convenor

Scotland is on the brink of major social and political change, again. In 2003 the election of SSP, Green and independent MSPs introduced a freshness into the stale atmosphere of Scottish politics. The Holyrood and Council elections will see another sea change in political power as it rushes away from New Labour. Jack McConnell would have preferred to fight these elections after Tony Blair had resigned because remarkably the man who took Labour to three successive historic Westminster victories is now a huge electoral liability. Although Blair is not hated as much as Thatcher, he is an unwanted dominant feature of these elections for Scottish Labour and they have braced themselves for serious setbacks. The worse the outcome for Labour the sooner Blair resigns, the sooner Britain pulls out of Iraq, the sooner the Union cracks. How much motivation do you need?

Blair's replacement by Gordon 'Blair' means that we can expect more of the same in Scotland after May - more imperialist warmongering by Labour, billions more spent on Trident missiles the same slavish adherence to neo-liberalism meaning more job losses, widening inequality, greater poverty, more privatisation of public services, more cuts in our pension rights. Think Labour? Think Iraq, Trident and PFI! Labour is no place for a socialist or social democrat to cast their vote.

Therefore whilst the election of Labour MSPs means more of the same blind loyalty to Blairism, the election of SSP MSPs raises the prospects of a more progressive Scotland, one at peace with the world, equal and fairer. No-one has opposed the harrowing military invasion and occupation of Iraq as effectively and as thoroughly as the SSP. No-one has done more to highlight the fact that Trident on the Clyde are an affront to the world and Scotland's reputation within it. No one has done more to oppose the incessant privatisation of our public services. No-one has championed trade union values more or attended more picket lines alongside nursery nurses, bus drivers, factory workers and public sector employees than the SSP. The SSP will be needed more than ever to help resist further Lib/Lab rule.

The SSP is standing candidates on all eight regional lists for Holyrood and in 100 council wards across Scotland. We will



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Fountain House, 1/3 Woodside Crescent, Charing Cross, Glasgow G3 7UJ
E:mail contact: richard.leonard@gmb.org.uk

present a manifesto that is anti-war, anti-Trident, anti-nuclear power, anti-Blair, anti-capitalist, but also pro-independence, pro-public ownership and public service, pro-trade union, and for a modern democratic republic and redistribution of wealth. Our policies on so many issues chime with the political centre of gravity of the Scottish people, which is far to the left of both Labour and SNP. Our five flagship policies for Holyrood are: Scotland wide free public transport, an independence referendum within a year, 100,000 affordable new homes for rent, healthy nutritious free school meals for all pupils and replacing the hated Council tax with a progressive income based alternative.

The SSP will put forward the socialist alternative and gain a presence in local councils. We need your vote and frankly you need us. Our opponents are committed in varying degrees to a free market, neo-liberal agenda. They do not support measures which would mean people come before profit, where social justice is married with environmental concern. Yes, the SSP has certainly suffered setbacks in recent times. Frankly, we have been to hell and back. But that is in the past. The SSP remains the force most capable of uniting the left, arguing against neo-liberalism and mobilising mass support and building a mass base for socialist ideas.

Make sure a new confident left-of-centre Scotland can emerge in May 2007. Make sure you also provide the strongest voice for the radical left, and you will only get that by voting SSP.

Tommy Sheridan is the leader of Solidarity

Scotland is a rich nation, most Scots enjoy a lifestyle and wealth ranked alongside the best in the world. Yet whole communities within Scotland and particularly Glasgow live in poverty and have the worst health, highest unemployment, poorest housing of any

part of Britain. Our children are disillusioned, dispirited and too many take to drink and drugs. This is a failure of Government, both in Westminster and Holyrood. Labour in Government has abused democracy. We were taken into a War based on lies; thousands of innocent people were killed and wounded including many Scots soldiers as a result of that lie. No wonder young people are disillusioned. Faced with a disillusioned youth, Labour seeks to criminalise the young: more ASBOs, more prisons – create more laws, more fear, more control, less freedom for us all.

Solidarity and I have a different vision, a new vision for Scotland – an independent Socialist Scotland. A modern republic that sets as its first priority the eradication of poverty, inequality and injustice. We want to see a parliament that has real powers. A parliament with teeth that would refuse to send troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, that would bring our oil, gas and electricity companies into public ownership, that could remove Trident and any successors from the Clyde and implement a living minimum wage of £8.50 an hour.

We want to give our youth hope for the future: to unite in defence of communities and of asylum seekers and other vulnerable people and their families; to unite against racism and Islamophobia. Solidarity is a new party and a socialist party. Our name encapsulates our whole political outlook. Solidarity: against poverty, inequality, low pay and discrimination in all its forms; against the war; against nuclear weapons; for public services not private profit. We reject the pro-business policies of New Labour, the Tories the Lib Dems and the SNP. We support a referendum on independence as soon as possible, but REAL independence also means freedom from low pay, bullying bosses and exploitation.



CWU SCOTLAND WELCOMES ALL DELEGATES AND VISITORS TO STUC 2007 IN GLASGOW AND HOPES YOU ALL HAVE A HAPPY AND SUCCESSFUL CONGRESS

JOHN BROWN
REGIONAL SECRETARY

WILLIE LAWSON
REGIONAL POLITICAL SECRETARY

Capitalism and the market have created an ecological disaster which must urgently be addressed. We support a massive investment in clean and green energy alternatives and public ownership of buses and trains to develop a genuine integrated transport system that would rapidly reduce carbon emissions. We believe that a democratic socialist economy would put the protection of the environment as a top priority.

I am often asked what is different about Solidarity. Why should I vote for you rather than another party with socialist policies? Solidarity is the only socialist party in Scotland with Credibility. Rosemary Byrne and I have moved bills to scrap the council tax, introduce drugs rehabilitation legislation, a ban on airguns, and free school meals. We have also ensured that the voice of workers in struggle was heard in the parliament by calling a debate on workers rights and invited the Simclar workers to parliament. Rosemary took part in the Kilwinning occupation at Simclar and spoke at the march and rally in Irvine.

Solidarity has rapidly grown, with branches being set up across Scotland. The overwhelming majority of the SSP trade unionists have joined rather than remain with a party whose leadership was widely seen to have colluded with the Murdoch press against a socialist. After the elections we will continue to fight in parliament; with workers and in communities – Solidarity: against war, against poverty, for socialism. In this election look left, think left, vote for Solidarity.

Margo MacDonald, Independent MSP for Lothians

Why vote for me? When explaining to friends I couldn't join them for a curry because I had to write this, one of them answered the question for me "To stop buggers like so and so getting in."

It's quite refreshing to have something said to me about elections that I haven't heard before. But that's not why I'm standing...Holyrood is the forum in which to argue, not for a referendum, but for the sovereignty needed to negotiate Scotland's contribution to the European energy policy. Also, I've unfinished business that I hope electors in Lothians give me the chance to complete.

Edinburgh should have Capital city status, with appropriate funding. As an Independent, I can pursue this much more easily than MSPs bound by national manifestos seeking to redress inequality in employment opportunities, life expectation and standard of living between the Edinburgh region, named in a recent survey as one of the UK's wealthiest, and the seriously deprived areas in Glasgow's east end, for example.

I support discriminate in favour of the have-nots. There's no justification for settling for the situation we have, with Ministers trumpeting how much better things are for the Scottish economy while a quarter of Scots are outside this circle of prosperity, living at or below the official poverty level. Jack McConnell's governments have tried to shift resources from rich to poor areas, but without a full pack of financial and fiscal cards, they're dealing with one hand tied behind their backs.

Scottish governments, whether it makes them uncomfortable or not, can't afford to allow Edinburgh to lose its edge as a World Heritage site. Edinburgh's contribution to the Scottish economy's growth rate far out-strips the Capital's population size in relation to Scotland's. The city is arguably the Scottish economy's main driver.

So regardless of who occupies the Council Leader's chair after May, I'll suggest we get together to build a coalition of elected politicians, business, trade unions and residents, to campaign for a funding stream that acknowledges the responsibilities discharged by Edinburgh on Scotland's behalf.

But I'll also remind Ministers that some areas of the Capital crop up in the groups indentified by the Child Poverty Action Group as the poorest of the poor, and that they deserve as much consideration as any of the other low wage earners and people on fixed incomes in other parts of Scotland. So I'll back the campaigns for free school dinners and for making Free Personal Care a reality rather than a slogan. And arguing for affordable housing provision in Edinburgh.

As we already know that the block grant will be trimmed to suit the Treasury's grand plan for GB, not Scotland, an Independent with such a focus might be an insurance policy for Edinburgh and Lothians...and maybe, encourager les autres. ■

how to vote

Three votes, three outcomes to influence, dozens of options. Gordon Morgan runs you through the things you might want to think about as you use your vote tactically to elect the largest number of progressive MSPs and councillors possible.

The May 3rd Elections could completely change the shape of Scottish politics. According to polls and bookies a further Labour / Lib Dem coalition is not a racing certainty and most councils look set to have no overall majority. The election outcome depends on contests for Constituencies, Lists and Councils. The voting figures for 2003 and significant factors which have changed are examined below to identify the key contests and choices for the left.

Constituencies

Although the Scottish parliamentary boundaries are the same as 2003, the political landscape has changed. In 2003 the SSP stood in constituencies as well as on regional lists and received 118,764 constituency votes. In 2007 neither Solidarity nor the SSP intend to stand in constituencies and Denis Canavan who won Falkirk West is retiring. Will these constituency votes go to Labour or the SNP?

New 'conservative and unionist' parties spring up daily; will the likes of the Scottish Voice lose the Conservatives seats? The tables on the next page show the 29 seats where a less than 15 per cent swing from the incumbent party would achieve change (plus Gordon where Alex Salmond is standing). Realistically the other 43 seats will show no change, and safe predictions are included in the tables as well.

In 2003, there were six regions where by dint of winning constituency seats, one party received more than its proportional share of the vote:

Central Scotland :	Labour	53% seats	40.4% vote
Glasgow:	Labour	59% seats	37.6% vote
Highlands:	Lib/Dems	33% seats	18.8% vote
Lothian:	Labour	38% seats	24.5% vote
Mid Scotland	Labour	31% seats	25.3% vote
West Scotland	Labour	50% seats	32.6% vote

The other two regions fairly evenly distributed seats in accordance with regional votes cast.

Accordingly, in order to win the largest number of seats, a party such as the SNP doesn't only need the largest number of list votes, it also needs to win constituency seats in those regions where it is underrepresented even if as a result it loses seats in areas where it is fairly represented.

Paradoxically, it is also in the interest of smaller parties not standing in the constituency sections to try to ensure that no one party is overrepresented in the constituency section as

this then reduces the per cent of votes required to have a list member elected.

Key constituency contests will be three seats in Central region, Glasgow Govan and seats in West Scotland, Lothians and Central Fife where the SNP is challenging Labour and where winning seats from Labour would give them a more even distribution of seats to votes. Voters who previously voted SSP may be critical in these seats as well as in the Dundee and Aberdeen seats.

In Gordon, Labour and Conservative voters will be critical in determining whether Alex Salmond returns to Holyrood. Labour will be keen to take Strathkelvin and Falkirk West from independents and Edinburgh south from the Lib Dems as well as holding seats from the SNP.

Regional Lists

Each voter can vote for only one party in the list. The opportunity for tactical voting is therefore reduced. Only in those areas

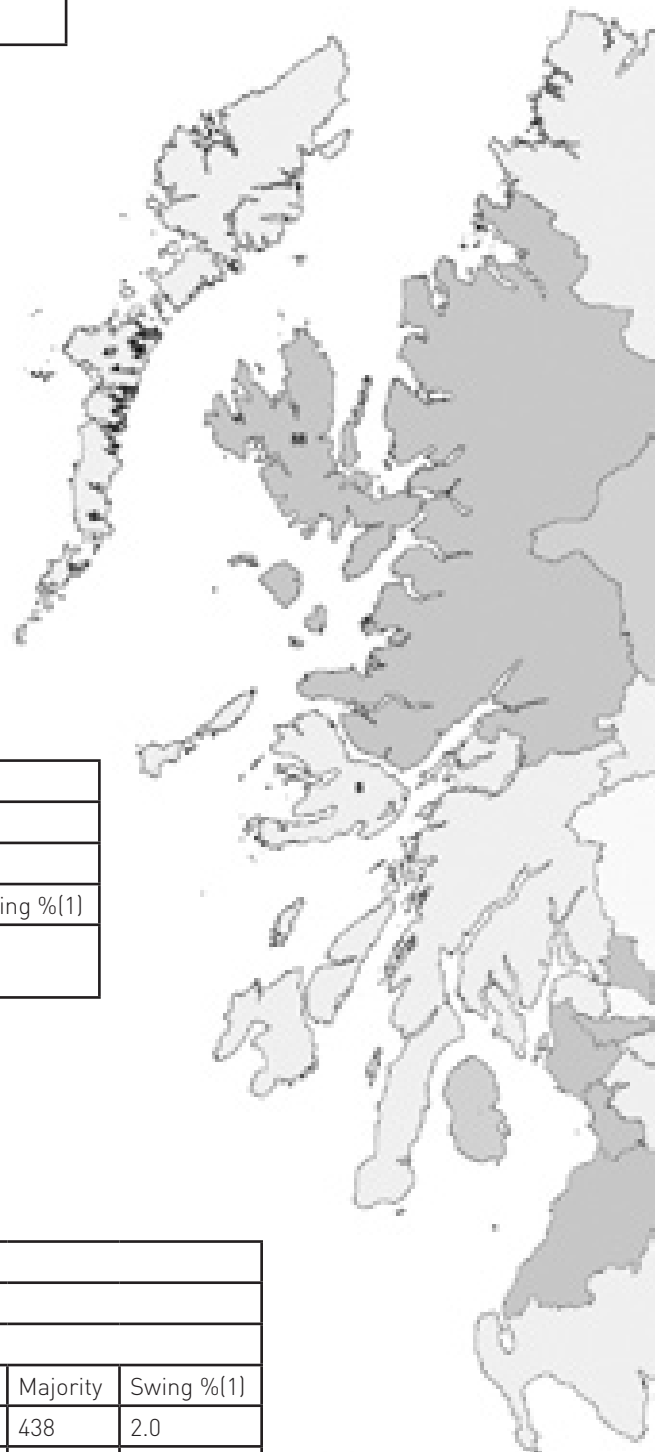


Highlands				
Safe Seats	4 Lib/Dem, 1 SNP			
Up for grabs				
Constituency	Incumbent	Second	Majority	Swing %(1)
Inverness East	SNP	Labour	1046	4.9
Western Isles	Labour	SNP	720	6.2
Caithness, Sutherland	Lib/Dem	Labour	2092	13.5

Central				
Safe Seats	7 Labour			
Up for grabs				
Constituency	Incumbent	Second	Majority	Swing %(1)
Falkirk West	Ind	SNP, Labour	10000	0.0
Cumbernauld	Labour	SNP	520	2.6
Kilmarnock	Labour	SNP	1210	4.8

Glasgow				
Safe Seats	9 Labour			
Up for grabs				
Constituency	Incumbent	Second	Majority	Swing %(1)
Glasgow Govan	Labour	SNP	1235	7.9

West				
Safe Seats	5 Labour			
Up for grabs				
Constituency	Incumbent	Second	Majority	Swing %(1)
Strathkelvin	Ind	Labour	438	2.0
Paisley South	Labour	SNP	2453	12.0
West Renfrewshire	Labour	SNP	2492	12.9
Eastwood	Labour	Con	3702	13.3



(1) Swing % is vote of s



North East				
Safe Seats	2 Lib/Dem, 2 SNP			
Up for grabs				
Constituency	Incumbent	Second	Majority	Swing % ^{1}
Dundee East	SNP	Labour	90	0.4
Aberdeen North	SNP	Labour	457	2.7
Dundee West	Labour	SNP	1066	6.5
Aberdeen Central	Labour	SNP	1242	9.1
Gordon	Lib/Dem	Con, SNP	4462	20.4

Mid Scotland and Fife				
Safe Seats	3 Labour, 1 Lib/Dem, 1 SNP			
Up for grabs				
Constituency	Incumbent	Second	Majority	Swing % ^{1}
Ochil	SNP	Labour	296	1.3
Perth	SNP	Con	727	3.4
Central Fife	Labour	SNP	2762	13.0
Stirling	Labour	Con	2880	13.5

Lothian				
Safe Seats	3 Labour, 1 Lib/Dem;			
Up for grabs				
Constituency	Incumbent	Second	Majority	Swing % ^{1}
Edinburgh South	Lib/Dem	Labour	158	0.8
Edinburgh Pentlands	Con	Labour	2111	8.5
Linlithgow	Labour	SNP	1970	8.5
Livingston	Labour	SNP	3670	13.8
Edinburgh Central	Labour	Lib/Dem	2666	14.7

South				
Safe Seats	4 Lab			
Up for grabs				
Constituency	Incumbent	Second	Majority	Swing % ^{1}
Galloway	Con	SNP	99	0.4
Tweeddale	Lib/Dem	SNP, Lab, Con	538	3.7
Dumfries	Labour	Con	1096	4.3
Ayr	Con	Labour	1890	7.3
Roxburgh	Lib/Dem	Con	2490	13.4

second / vote incumbent * 50

guaranteed to be overrepresented in seats through the constituency vote can a free vote be given without damaging their own party's representation. Based on the safe seats above:

- in Central Scotland Labour will secure at least seven seats (41 per cent) and in 2003 got 40.4 per cent of the list vote;
- in Glasgow Labour will secure at least nine seats (53 per cent) and in 2003 got 37.6 per cent of the list vote.
- In West Scotland Labour will secure at least five seats (31 per cent) and in 2003 got 32.6 per cent of the list vote. They also are likely to hold at least Eastwood against the Conservatives, particularly if other Conservative parties stand.
- In central, in 2003 Denis Canavan got 5.9 per cent of the list vote and some votes may return to Labour. It is possible but highly unlikely given polls that Labour will receive any additional members in Central Scotland or West Scotland through the list. It is virtually impossible to envisage any additional Labour members in Glasgow being elected from the list.

This therefore gives Labour voters in Glasgow, and West Scotland and most likely Central Scotland in effect a free vote in the list to help get a left candidate from another party elected. Given the split resulting in Solidarity and the SSP, left voters have a choice of parties. Only in Glasgow did the SSP get two MSPs elected with 15.6 per cent of the vote and it is possible that one from each of Solidarity and the SSP could be elected again, but there as elsewhere voters will have to choose.

Councils

The introduction of STV for councils and the introduction of (fairly low) salaries and pensions for councillors will transform Local Authorities. Most councils will probably have no overall majority.

STV itself is the antithesis of tactical voting. In effect you have to choose not only between parties but between candidates from the same party. This will cause difficulties for Labour which is virtually the only party standing more than one candidate in multimember wards. In certain, fairly unusual circumstances, it would be possible for everyone to vote for one candidate, and for the other Labour candidate to be eliminated, whereas in a more even vote both could be elected. Labour will therefore be advised to ask people to vote for different candidates in different areas. In theory, such a situation cannot arise provided all voters identify the second candidate for their party as their second choice. All supporters of the party will then make their vote count.

For the left, by extension, we should use our second, third, fourth and fifth votes for other parties which have candidates of the left or indeed not of the extreme right. Thus I will vote for Solidarity, SSP, Labour, SNP, Green, Lib/Dem etc – not necessarily in that order depending on the candidates. I will even cast a vote, say number nine, for a Tory if there is a BNP candidate.

If we adopt the approach of encouraging everyone to use all their voting preferences, then the left as a whole will be represented in councils in proportion to its weight. Moreover, if we vote for the best left candidate first – irrespective of party, we may end up with a very effective left influence across councils. If the best candidate in your view is a member of another party and you give them your first preference and she/he gets elected great, if she/he fails to get elected, your second preference for the candidate of your own party will count as if the other candidate had not stood and you gave your party your first preference. In any event your vote will still be effective and will count – provided you use your preferences.

Use all your voting preferences.

Gordon Morgan is former Chief Officer in local government and a member of Solidarity

It's Scotland's Water

- what does 'Mutualisation' mean?

Mutualisation is a policy put forward by the CBI, adopted by the Scottish Tories and pursued by the Chairman of the Water Industry Commission. Liberal Democrats have now also backed this 'solution'.

It means Scottish Water would be transferred to a company - in theory owned by the people of Scotland - in fact by the financial institutions who will buy the assets (paid for by the taxpayer) at a fraction of their value.

This mutual company may have some directors elected by water customers but the balance would be made up of directors picked by the financial institutions who fund the company.

To satisfy them that there is minimal risk, these directors will insist on privatisation, contracting out the maintenance, delivering the water, running the sewage treatment plants and all the practical water services, to private companies (mostly English and French) – like the practice at Welsh Water.

This is privatisation in practice. Customers would pay higher charges to finance higher borrowing costs and company profits.

Don't let them privatise Scotland's Water!

If you want to find out more about the campaign to keep Scotland's water public, contact UNISON - d.watson@unison.co.uk 0870 7777 006. www.unison-scotland.org.uk/water/water

UNISON
Scotland

Greetings to the Scottish TUC Conference 2007

From:

Derek Simpson General Secretary,

John Quigley Scottish Regional Secretary

James McAveety Chair of Scottish Regional Council
on behalf of Amicus the campaigning union

Lets have a successful conference
Building Up Scotland, not Breaking Up Britain

Amicus working for members in Scotland
Campaigning for Equality, Health & Safety and Pensions



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a guide to recognising your msps

We only get to hold individual MSPs to account once every four years. Henry McCubbin assesses what they've been up to since your last opportunity to help you decide who's worth re-electing

Is it really four years since I last wrote our pre-election assessment of the performance of our MSPs? I'm afraid it is and during this time that little police action in Iraq has consumed the mortal souls of some 600,000 Iraqis, according to the Lancet which used the same methodology to count the dead as we did to justify our blitzing of Yugoslavia. You can reference back to that edition at www.scottishleftreview.org/php/upload/slr-850-SLR115.pdf if you wish, for the list of those Labour and Conservative MSPs who supported this slaughter, which has now lasted as long as the 1914-18 war. But just to remind you how the vote went in these far off days I have provided a table below.

Motion					
Iraq (16th Jan 2003) Labour amendment supporting the use of force before UN authorisation.					
For		Against		Abstentions	
66	Lab 48	51	SNP 31	3	Lab 3
	Con 18		LD 15		
			SSP 1		
			Ind 1		
			Lab 1		
			Green 1		

Our previous guide lifted the phrase 'Forces of Conservatism' as used by Tony Blair at a Labour conference, to study when the interests of New Labour, the LibDems and the Conservatives merged. Iraq was an interesting example where New Labour, like the cow jumping over the moon, cleared the LibDems and bedded down with the Tories. Has this trick been replicated in the present Parliament? Well yes; it happened on a motion to remove prescription charges in Scotland, a policy already introduced in devolved Wales! In the debate itself the invisible hand of Gordon Brown is clearly felt by the Labour benches mindful no doubt of the fate which met Henry McLeish for introducing Care for the Elderly in the teeth of Brown's opposition. The vote went as follows:

Motion					
Abolition of NHS Prescription Charges					
For		Against		Abstentions	
40	SNP 22	77	Lab 46	1	LD 1
	Green 7		Con 16		
	Ind 5		LD 15		
	SSP 6				

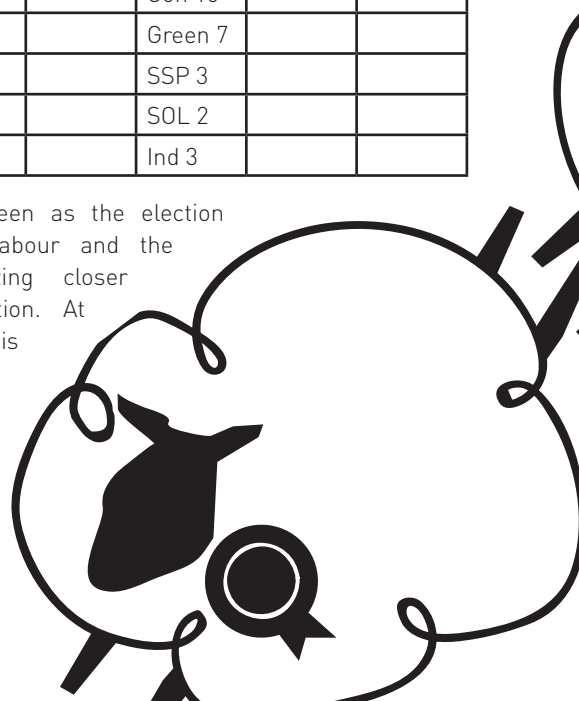
In the above case we find all three FoCs in bed together. The drive here has to be the ideological need for neo liberals (yes

that includes Gordon Brown) to extinguish any last examples universal provision, as and when they can, hence the common purpose uniting against the motion. Poor Frank McAveety really got wound up in this debate over the fact stated by Colin Fox that there were several people in the chamber already receiving free prescriptions while in receipt of a handsome salary as an MSP. There was no contradiction in this at all, said he, and the existing system was the most perfect that could be devised. Back to pies and beans Frank.

Some votes did produce more interesting political alignments and none more so than over the contentious issue of the closure of Accident and Emergency units. This debate goes back to the birth of the NHS where the problem wasn't the distribution of facilities but the distribution of consultants who apparently, in general, have a herding instinct around Harley Street and private practices or large teaching hospitals. Nye Bevan's solution then was, to quote his rather inelegant phrase, to "stuff their mouths with gold". Andy Kerr's solution was to cave in to them. The result will likely be the loss of some surprising seats by Labour and the LibDems. Several Labour MSPs have attended public meetings in their constituencies making noises against closure but when push comes to votes and they return to the safety of their Holyrood bunker the table below tells all. I can only assume that the LibDems have avoided closures in their areas apart from the single abstention.

Motion					
Labour amendment to support closure of Monklands and Ayr A&E					
For		Against		Abstentions	
63	Lab 47	54	SNP 21	1	LD 1
	LD 16		Con 16		
			Green 7		
			SSP 3		
			SOL 2		
			Ind 3		

What we have seen as the election approaches is Labour and the LibDems squeezing closer within the coalition. At the start of this session it wasn't always the case and the CalMac fiasco is a good example of such disharmony. As has now

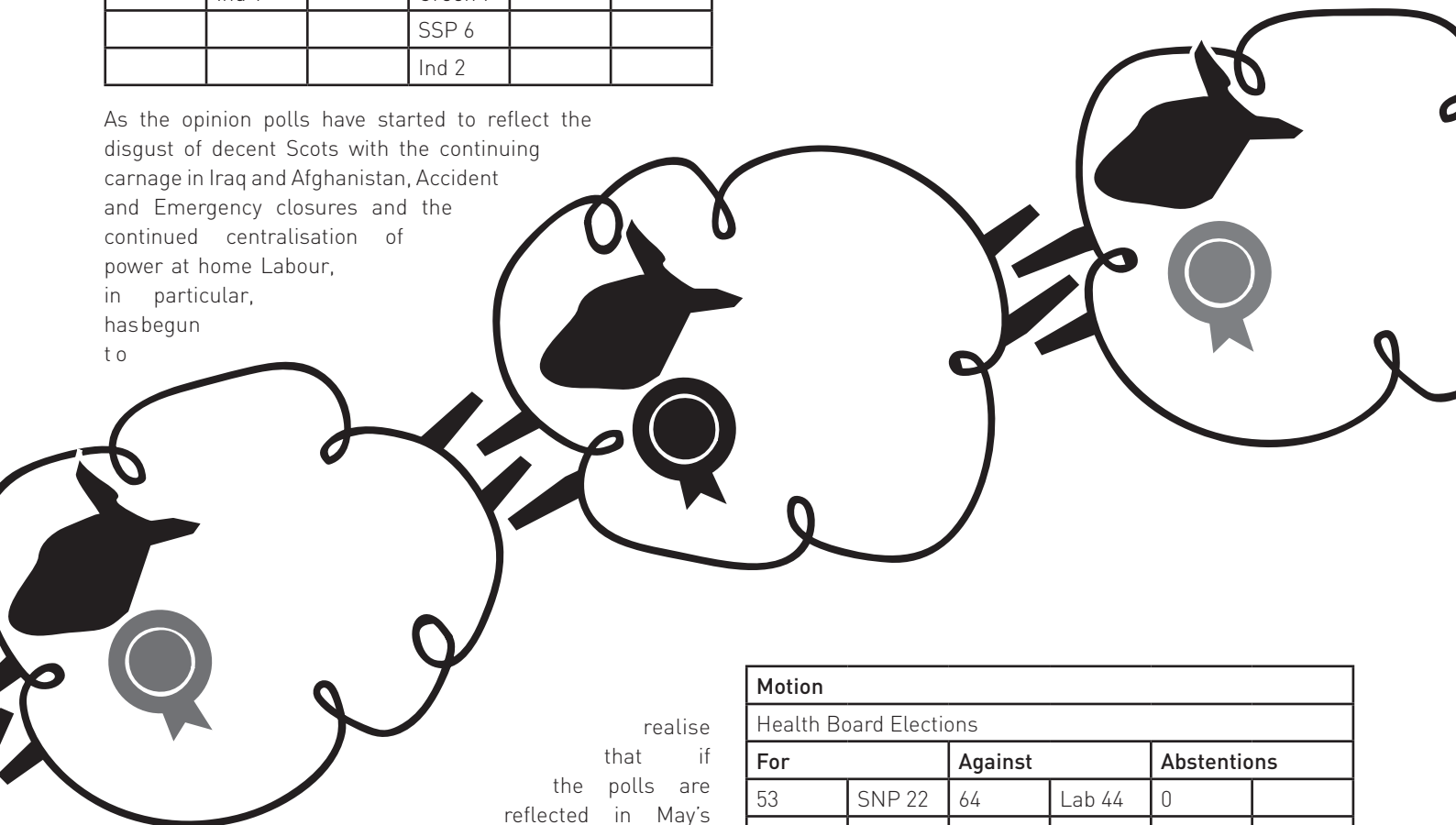


been exposed, the decision of the Executive to cling to its own eccentric interpretation of a European Court judgement in the Altmark case was wrong. In fact questions have to be asked of both the Executive and the Commission as to what actually happened when our Transport Minister met with the Transport Commissioner. My own knowledge of European decision-making tells me that the Department of Transport through UKREP (the UK Government's representatives in Brussels) will have been in the lead for this issue. If parliament wasn't misled then who made the error? Whatever happened there is no doubt that tendering would appeal to economic neo-liberals, one of whom, Nicol Stephen, had been in charge of that portfolio when instead of taking rail back into public ownership, as he could have, he passed the milchcow over to First Transport, a company he worked for prior to joining the Parliament.

The mood was such during this period that fourteen Labour members abstained thus leaving the Lib Dem's and, lest they forget the rules of coalition politics, their own transport minister out to dry.

Motion					
Opposing the tendering of Calmac ferry services in the Clyde and Hebrides (8th Dec 2004)					
For		Against		Abstentions	
53	Lab 35	54	SNP 22	15	Lab 14
	LD 17		Con 17		Ind 1
	Ind 1		Green 7		
			SSP 6		
			Ind 2		

As the opinion polls have started to reflect the disgust of decent Scots with the continuing carnage in Iraq and Afghanistan, Accident and Emergency closures and the continued centralisation of power at home Labour, in particular, has begun to



Recent votes provide an illustration of what I am alluding to. For not only are we seeing the ditching of their own party's manifesto commitments by Labour, thus upsetting their own support, but we are increasingly seeing the successful use of tactical motions by the SNP to split the coalition. In its manifesto for the 2003 Scottish Election New Labour pledged "We will consult on introducing a directly elected element to all NHS Boards". Nothing was happening until Bill Butler called his party's bluff and produced a bill to ensure that 50-per-cent-plus-one of the members of health boards should be elected locally. It gained sufficient support on its way through committee (with only the Lib Dem Euan Robson dissenting) to be presented to the house.

The table shown below tells an interesting tale. A Labour party manifesto commitment ditched, we suspect, due to a deal with their coalition partners hence the action of Euan Robson. But the Tories have popped up in foreign territory. Health Board appointments are coveted prizes for political activists. They are part time jobs, a handful of meetings each year, with a payment of £7,500 for ordinary members and £23,000 for Chairs. They are invited to the Boards by Andy Kerr. It is what we call patronage. The lowly position of the Tories in Scotland has left them out of this gravy train but on top of that David Cameron had just visited Scotland to tell his troops that more decisions should be taken at local level and this would certainly fit with that wish. I feel you should know that one Tory did vote against the whip - Phil Gallie. I'm in no position to impute a motivation for his actions - ever.

realise that if the polls are reflected in May's election result then they will need the Lib Dem's more than the Lib Dem's need them. Many Labour MSPs may survive but power and position will be lost to them without the Lib Dems.

Motion					
Health Board Elections					
For		Against		Abstentions	
53	SNP 22	64	Lab 44	0	
	Con 17		LD 16		
	Green 6		Ind 3		
	SSP 4		Con 1		
	Lab 3				
	Ind 1				

And so to Trident. This vote illustrates clearly how a small change in the balance of power could make the next Parliament an interesting place. Once again we see the Lib Dem's where they truly belong under Nicol Stephen and that is in close proximity with New Labour and the Tories. Although the result of the Trident vote was unsatisfactory from the point of view of a sensible use of taxpayers money and the pursuit of world peace it did draw blood in another way. It forced the resignation of Malcolm Chisholm who, from the viewpoint of New Labour's opportunists, has been cursed with a conscience.

Motion					
For scrapping Trident					
For		Against		Abstentions	
45	SNP 25	72	Lab 42	2	Lab 1
	Green 7		Con 15		LD 1
	SSP 3		LD 14		
	Lab 4		Ind 1		
	SOL 2				
	Ind 4				

There is little doubt that the SNP has discovered how to draw blood with short and unequivocal motions and this they repeated in their vote over removal of tolls to cross the Forth and Tay Bridges. The SNP motion was simple and was moved by Tricia Marwick. It read "That the Parliament believes that the tolls should be removed from the Forth Road Bridge and the Tay Road Bridge". This really was a torpedo aimed at the open sore that still exists between Labour and LibDems in Dunfermline West constituency which Labour lost by landslide to their coalition partners. It also exposed how shallow the commitment to environmental concerns really is within the Scottish Parliament. The result of the vote on the SNP motion was:

Motion					
SNP motion on removal of tolls on the Forth and Tay road bridges.					
For		Against		Abstentions	
58	SNP 25	65	Lab 42	1	Lab 1
	Con 17		LD 14		
	Lab 6		Green 6		
	Ind 3		Ind 3		
	SSP 3				
	LD 2				
	SOL 2				

But the voting on the Green amendment exposed the rank hypocrisy of Scotland's political elite, left and right, to the threat of global warming:

Green amendment
Leave out from "the tolls" to end and insert "existing tolls on the Forth Road Bridge and the Tay Road Bridge should be replaced with a scheme of variable charging which takes into account factors such as occupancy levels, peak hour traffic flows and specific exemptions, including for public transport, and that the Tay Road Bridge Joint Board and the Forth Transport Estuary Forum should be given more flexibility to use toll revenues to deal with transport issues in the vicinity."

For		Against		Abstentions	
7	Green 6	117	Lab 49	0	
	Ind 1		SNP 25		
			Con 17		
			LD 16		
			Ind 5		
			SSP 3		
			SOL 2		

Finally, the hurt sustained from the by-election contest and fears of what Labour and Lib Dems see as the real threat to their cosy political sleepover can be detected in the almost juvenile attack on the SNP contained in the wording of the Executives amendment on the tolls debate.

Executive amendment					
Leave out from "believes" to end and insert "commits to a replacement crossing across the Forth and calls on the Cabinet to commit to preparatory work to start immediately; calls for the case for abolition of the tolls on the Fife Bridges to be considered in the light of the commitment to the new crossing; notes that the SNP's sums do not add up and that under its current plans the SNP would not be able to afford to lift the tolls and pay for the construction of a new crossing; notes that its proposals do not address the impact of congestion or other environmental, social and economic impacts, and notes the importance of a sustainable transport policy, including smart tolling and investment in public transport to meet the long-term needs of Scotland."					
For		Against		Abstentions	
56	Lab 41	66	SNP 25	1	Lab 1
	LD 14		Con 17		
	Ind 1		Green 6		
			Lab 6		
			Ind 5		
			SSP 3		
			SOL 2		
			LD 2		

If you were ever to search for textual evidence as to why only half of the Scottish electorate vote you will find it all in the toll bridge debate. The motion on behalf of the Executive looks as though it has been drafted for a primary schools shadow hustings right down to a wee Douglas Alexander in short trousers telling everyone that their sums don't add up 'cos his big sister's told him.

The big story from the toll bridge debate is that twq Liberals and six Labour MSPs were peeled off from their parties and voted against the Executive and one of those rebels was Labour's whip at Holyrood, Scott Barry, who happens to be the Member for Dunfermline West! Now that's what I call collateral damage. Could this lead to the election providing us with a parliamentary mix which delivers the radical open government we have been looking for? ■

Henry McCubbin is a former Labour MEP



SCOTLAND

Working for a New Fighting Back Union

T&G Scotland sends greetings to all STUC Congress 2007 delegates and urges support for:

- A properly resourced union organising agenda throughout Scotland
- The introduction of a Trade Union Freedom Bill
 - Industrial and political measures to combat climate change
- Publicly owned, integrated and regulated public transport
 - Equal treatment for all agency and migrant workers

Mike Brider
Regional Secretary

Martin Carroll
Regional Chairperson

Regional Office, 290 Bath Street, Glasgow G2 4LD Tel: 0845 345 0141

reach out and make a difference

Grahame Smith outlines the priorities for the trade union movement in Scotland

Our Annual Congress falls during the Scottish election campaign and gives the STUC and our affiliates a chance to once again highlight trade union priorities for Scotland. The theme of Congress this year is 'Reaching Out', an approach that has never been more apt. Despite a buoyant employment market there are still many people struggling to access their rights at work – migrant workers, young workers, black workers, women workers, old workers, disabled workers and many more underrepresented groups across society that unions can give a helping hand to. Organising these workers presents a huge challenge for trade unions but a huge opportunity as well. Many migrant workers have recently come to Scotland, particularly from Poland. Their experiences in the main of living and working in Scotland appears to be positive. However, there is increasing anecdotal evidence to suggest pockets of exploitation exist with below minimum wage pay, long hours and no paid holidays. Equally worrying is an apparent trend in skilled sectors such as construction, to use migrant labour to drive down agreed industry rates of pay – creating dangerous tensions.

There are numerous examples of trade union innovation across Scotland helping migrant workers and importantly ensuring a wider understanding amongst Scottish workers of the problems they face. Unions such as UCATT, GMB, TGWU, and Usdaw are responding in a positive manner to the needs of migrant workers and giving them a voice at work. The challenge for the Scottish trade union movement is to take these success stories and cultivate them into normal day to day activity which assists all underrepresented groups. If we want to continue representing vulnerable workers as effectively in the future as we have in the past we must translate these individual struggles into a collective voice under a trade union banner. Effective organising, local workplace campaigns and quality representation are key to our future relevance and strength. I'm beginning to sense a shift in the point of reference across the movement which if seized upon appropriately could transform levels of trade union membership within a generation. There is a bigger picture forming as well and union mergers will obviously help national unions with economies of scale and synergies. However, ultimately the litmus test of union mergers will be if they rejuvenate workplace organisation and representation to advance rights at work.

A larger, more representative and wider membership allows the STUC to speak up with increasing authority and relevance on issues that concern workers – such as the economic direction of Scotland. For too long 'business leaders' have managed to over-simplify this debate and have shifted the policy focus onto cutting 'red tape' and the so called 'crowding out' of the private sector by the public sector. I believe we have managed to confront those myths effectively in the last few months and I'm pleased to see greater scrutiny by the media of the more outlandish claims made by the CBI and others. I'm also pleased that workforce development is finally being recognised as key to future economic success and I'm optimistic we will see more intervention from an incoming Executive that ensures a more responsible approach from employers in the future – something which is long overdue.

Unfortunately it's pretty clear that not all businesses play by the rules and despite some genuine advances in employment legislation in the last ten years, many Scottish workers are still vulnerable to ruthless employers. The recent events at Simclar and Weir Pumps emphasise the need for stronger employment legislation. The actions of Simclar management in January were nothing short of scandalous and the anger of the Simclar workers entirely understandable. They were treated disgracefully by an owner who is experienced in closing plants but not in dealing with an organised workforce. Apart from the fact that the tax payer is likely to foot the bill of Simclar's mismanagement the most frustrating aspect of the redundancies was the scant regard for the workers involved and the redundancy legislation designed to protect them. The lack of consultation with unions, the workforce or anybody that matters by the Weir Group before announcing its intention to end over 130 years of world-class engineering at Cathcart is another example of poor management. This is a profitable company with a good order book that has created considerable uncertainty for 450 highly skilled workers. In the cold light of day this decision will ultimately mean the loss of more Scottish manufacturing jobs.

At a time when other European economies are creating jobs in manufacturing, Germany over 250,000 in the past year, Scotland is losing more and more. Decisions of this nature from profitable companies – taken by well paid executives behind closed doors – are disastrous for the workers affected and their families and for our economy. If our information and consultation rights were the same as in the other parts of Europe unions could contest these sorts of decisions before they are taken. We will only meet the challenge of globalisation if business shows a greater level of corporate social responsibility and involves employees in building successful companies that have a long term commitment to Scotland.

Despite these recent jobs losses, employment levels are high, but jobs are less secure. That's why investment in R&D, technology and skills is vital to growing the economy and keeping well paid quality jobs in Scotland. The countries which are meeting the challenge from low-cost economies most successfully, such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark, are doing so because of their focus on workplace skills and employee involvement through their trade union. There are examples from all over Scotland where proper workforce involvement and development has given businesses a competitive edge, improved industrial relations and benefited individual workers. There is an old saying that 'managing is too important to be left to managers'. I know we have thousands of talented and knowledgeable people in our workforce and unions who can make a positive contribution to the business decisions that affect day to day life. There is a clear case in my opinion for involving workers earlier and more regularly in key decisions that impact on their work – unfortunately this is the exception rather than the norm in the UK.

As we approach the third Scottish Parliament elections in May 2007, important decisions need to be taken about the type of



Campaigning for the return of rail to the public sector

Campaigning to keep Caledonian MacBrayne's lifeline ferry services in public hands

Let's put the public back in public transport

Bob Crow, General Secretary

John Leach, President

Scotland in which we want to live and work. We have identified seven areas of priority, our '7 for 2007' for an incoming Scottish Executive - growing the Scottish economy; meeting the global challenge; building a fairer Scotland; delivering world class public services; protecting Scotland's workforce; securing energy supply and investing in Scotland's future. Establishing a national economic forum is one of our key recommendations to meet the global challenge. I believe such a forum would allow social partners, unions and employers, to discuss the strategic issues facing the Scottish economy, encourage an understanding of the challenges we face now and in the future and promote a partnership approach to dealing with problems of national significance - such as climate change. As I mentioned earlier another factor of frustration for the STUC has been the spurious 'crowding out' claims promoted by the usual suspects on the right of the political spectrum. Serious academic evidence demonstrates a positive relationship between public spending and economic growth. Our manifesto calls on Scottish Water to remain publicly owned and accountable, for no further extension of PFI and PPP and for the Executive to examine alternative ways to finance public infrastructure investment. Concerns also remain around issues such as the equal pay gap, persistent racist attitudes and the plight of the many economically inactive in our society. These issues, together with continued gender segregation in the workplace and voter apathy suggest that building a fairer, tolerant and more participative Scotland is a long-term project.

Our campaign for corporate homicide legislation and our support for Karen Gillion MSP's Members Bill, which was withdrawn last summer due to time pressures and the complex legal issues involved, will be revisited if, as we expect, the Westminster legislation does not close the 'Transco loophole'. We will also step up our campaign for the Scottish Executive to officially recognise International Workers Memorial Day which falls on the 28 April each year. The purpose of the day is, not only to commemorate the lives of over two million people who lose their lives worldwide each year as a result of work-

related accidents and diseases, but also to focus on improving workplace health and safety in Scotland. In addition to this the STUC is hopeful a memorial to those who have lost their lives at work can be situated in Glasgow and we are in discussion with the City Council about making this happen.

Although energy policy is a reserved issue, the Scottish Government has responsibility for the key related areas of skills, planning and the environment. We want to see the Scottish Executive support a viable distinct and balanced Scottish energy policy that meets the needs of workers, industry and consumers. Due to the devolved and reserved sensitivities around this issue many stakeholders feel disengaged from the decision making process. We believe this can be rectified by developing a Scotland-UK stakeholder forum to facilitate strategic discussions about Scotland's future energy supply. Despite what some would have you believe Scotland's educational performance at all levels continues to improve - although we still face many challenges. In partnership with our affiliates in the Education sector the STUC will be pushing the Executive after May for a radical reduction in class sizes. We believe this can be done by utilising the expected fall in school rolls, across the board in all sectors of school education, and to ensure that adequate numbers of teachers are recruited to meet current shortfalls.

The outcome of the Scottish Parliament Elections is too close to call. There have been many achievements by the Scottish trade union movement over the last four years. Tackling discrimination in the workplace, violence against workers and workplace skills are all areas to be proud of. We have shown that by working together and collaborating on issues that concern us jointly that real progress can be made and this bodes well for the next four years. No matter the result the STUC will seek early discussions with the First Minister and the Scottish Executive to press home the devolved policy priorities of the Scottish trade union movement with the same rigour as always. It's going to be an interesting few months. ■

Grahame Smith is General Secretary of the STUC

the possibility of socialism

The Scottish Left Review Press has just published its third book. Gregor Gall explains what its about.

Over thirty years ago, Victor Kiernan in the **New Left Review** (no. 93, 1975) posed the question: 'Is there a Scottish road to socialism?' in reviewing the original **Red Paper on Scotland**, edited by a then young Gordon Brown. Back then, a heady mix of socialism and social democracy intermingled with significant workers' struggle like the UCS work-in. The issue of a Scottish road to socialism has waxed and waned since depending on whether the left has looked more or less likely to make a breakthrough at the British level.

But the events and processes since the devolution referendum of 1979 have raised the question of whether there can be a 'Scottish road to socialism' again. (A more modern frame of reference would be 'Is another Scotland possible?' after the slogan 'Another world is possible'.) Indeed, since devolution in 1979, there have been a number of salient developments; the moves by the Scottish Executive to take a 'pink-tinged' divergent course from Westminster; the development of the 'Scottish solutions to Scottish problems' approach; the ascendancy of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) within the left in Scotland; the rise of the Scottish Greens and independents in the Scottish Parliament; the stasis in the SNP; and the decline of the influence of the left in Scottish Labour.

These have brought the question of whether there is or can be a Scottish road to socialism into much sharper relief than at any time before. Previously, with the experience of the short-lived and ill-fated Scottish Labour Party of the 1970s and the significant presence but little manifest power of Scottish Labour left within the British Labour Party in the 1980s, both 'socialism in Scotland' and 'Scottish socialism' were seen by most on the left as maybe longed for but, nonetheless, far off pipedreams. However, a series of salient events in the approach to the Scottish Parliament and councils elections in May 2007 has now put a different complexion on the issue of a Scottish road to socialism. First, there has been the fratricide and implosion affecting the Scottish Socialist Party since the debacle surrounding the resignation of Tommy Sheridan as national convenor in November 2004. This, and the establishment of the rival Solidarity - Scotland's Socialist Movement by Sheridan, has led to the possibility of the end of the SSP parliamentary presence and the prospect a re-run of the outcome of the 1999 Scottish parliamentary elections. Here, a split vote between the SSP and Scargill's Socialist Labour party led to only one MSP, namely, Tommy Sheridan, being elected despite a combined vote of some 100,000 electors allowing more than one socialist MSP to be elected. Second, there is the possibility of an enhanced Scottish Green parliamentary group which could either hold the balance of power and/or enter a form of governing coalition. In the Greens, there is a fairly clear and equal right/left division. And third, there is the possibility of the SNP becoming the largest single party with the eclipse of Labour and the Liberal Democrats. With the latter in prospect, some commentators have already dubbed the 2007 parliamentary elections as the 'independence election'. These changes and possibilities have reconfigured the balance of forces and opinion operating around the issue of a Scottish road to socialism.

In order to explore the possible dimensions of socialism in Scotland, an array of politicians and activists-cum-commentators in Scotland, across the so-called 'nationalist-unionist' divide, were asked to consider the following questions in responding to the central question, 'Is there a Scottish road to socialism?'

- What do you mean by socialism? Is this a form of social democracy, nationalisation, a form of market socialism or 'revolutionary (as opposed to reformist) socialism'? Thus, what roles do the state and organs of civic society like trade unions play in your conception of socialism? Put bluntly, what will socialism look like and how will it be structured?
- How can 'your' idea of socialism be achieved? What social forces are required for this to happen and how may these become ready to act in such a way? What timescale to you envisage for this? Do you see there being stages of encroachment on capitalism being involved? What role do you see for parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggles and what is the relationship between the two? What purchase has a 'transitional' approach?
- Can there be such a thing as 'Scottish socialism' or only 'socialism in Scotland'? Within this, what are the roles of national identity, the social democratic ethos in Scotland and of Scottish nationalism (however defined)?
- Can it happen just within Scotland?
- What role would independence or federalism play in this?
- What role might Scottish developments play in the wider world?

The contributions have been brought together to form the edited book, **Is there a Scottish Road to Socialism?**. The contributors offer different visions of socialism, some implicitly, some explicitly, ranging from social justice reforms and social democracy to socialism as a revolutionary break in the form of society and based upon workers' power. The distinction between these two poles concerns the size of the role, and the role itself, for the free market mechanism, for private capital and for NGOs like charities and cooperatives, as well as whether the existing state can be captured and transformed as a vehicle for progressive measures. Similarly, there are different emphases, some implicit and some explicit from the contributors, on whether the attainment of social justice reforms and social democracy are ends in themselves or whether they can act as a transmission belt to socialism. Such views have a bearing on whether the attainment of an elementary form of full social justice and equality in the form of socialism will be a gradual and creeping process or one comprising a sharp and tumultuous rupture. Likewise, there are different emphases on whether a social democratic type of society can or will be an intermediate form of society with regard to whether it will have a self-limiting (and thus self-inhibiting) or capacity-building (and consciousness-raising) character vis-à-vis socialism. In other words, can a current society be pregnant with the next and new society in it?

A second major issue relates to how socialism can be achieved in one country in relation to other contemporary developments in neighbouring countries: can there be 'socialism in one country'? So could Scotland move forward in advance of others; could it be an example to others; or could Scotland merely represent the most advanced part of a general move towards socialism? Alternatively, would an independent socialist Scotland starve itself out of autarkic and distorted existence? Herein, we have the crux of the matter, concerning the interrelationship of national, regional and global developments towards socialism. Meantime, a third major concern pertains to the role of parliament, whether this be the Scottish and/or British Parliament. Can socialism be legislated for, given that governments are often regarded as being 'in office' rather than 'in power' because of the array of sources of greater, and reactionary, powers outside parliament like the armed forces, police, judiciary, civil service and private corporations? Again, the place of parliament raises the problematic of whether the current and capitalist state can be captured and transformed or does it have to be destroyed and a socialist state made anew?

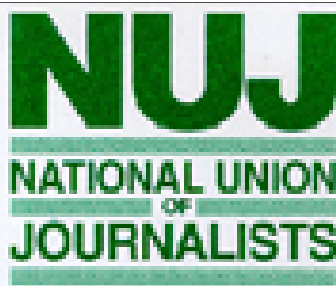
A fourth set of issues revolves around 'class' and 'nation' as analytical concepts and manifest realities. Many have taken 'class' as antipathetic to 'nation' where the interests of workers are concerned. Set against this, there has long been a significant tendency in Scotland to see 'nation' as 'class' because of the

radical nature of the predominant form of Scottish national identity under Thatcherism. And this then takes us back to the issue of the campaign for independence: is independence possible; what form would it take (capitalist or otherwise); and is there sufficient support for it?

The contributors to the book are former Labour MP and MSP John McAllion, independent MSP Campbell Martin, Campaign for Socialism activist Vince Mills, Scottish Left Review editor Robin McAlpine, Independence First activist Joe Middleton, economist David Purdy, Democratic Left convenor Stuart Fairweather, John Foster of the Communist Party of Britain, GMB organiser Richard Leonard, SNP activist Bill Wilson, SSP national secretary Pam Currie, Peter McColl of the Scottish Green Party, Eric Canning of the Communist Party of Scotland, and historian and Solidarity member, Neil Davidson. ■

Is there a Scottish Road to Socialism? is edited by Gregor Gall, costs £8.99 and is available from Scottish Left Review, 10 Henderson Row, Edinburgh EH3 5DS. Make cheques payable to 'Scottish Left Review Press'. ISBN 97809506224.

Gregor Gall is Professor of Industrial Relations at the University of Hertfordshire



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web review

Henry McCubbin

Our pre-election edition has commentaries by activists on the state of their parties. To facilitate further insight into the official position of these parties I have compiled a list of their official web sites. For the benefit of contradiction hunters I have grouped them so that you can compare their Scottish branch with their UK headquarters except of course for those parties that don't have UK headquarters (unless Alex Salmond counts as that in the SNP).

The Tories have a very professional looking site but close examination exposes weaknesses in regards to updating. Particularly for ongoing stories as news outlets will rip off web photos and quotes when needed but will bypass sites with "old" news. www.scottishtories.org.uk and www.conservatives.com

Labour's Scottish site is located at www.scottishlabour.org.uk and is colour co-ordinated with Tony Blair's web site at www.labour.org.uk. They have also listed their regional candidates for the Holyrood election. Now to the Lib Dems. According to the new electoral rules just pronounced by their anodyne leader, the SNP needs to win 50 per cent of the seats before they can have a referendum on independence yet the same Lib Dems have only shared a bed with Labour because of our unique fourth past the post system for the Scottish Parliament. www.scotlibdems.org.uk www.libdems.org.uk. Could I also draw your attention to the UK sites of Labour and LibDems where you will find on the home page a stock photograph of the same doctor with the only difference being that it has been rotated. Or should I say spun?

The Greens, at the time of publishing, still have not started electioneering via their website – this in spite of them having had their annual conference some weeks ago so click on in hope www.scottishgreens.org.uk where you will also find their list candidates. www.greenparty.org.uk

The Scottish National Party is to be found at www.snp.org. When I last looked they had added activex controlled pages which were

refusing to launch. The best advice for them would be to keep it simple or else those who are nervous about downloads in any case will not bother with your site.

And finally, the party every other party wants to be rude about, something to do with sharks circling round a wounded prey. Sad point is that the wounds have been self inflicted yet their web site is bright, full of campaigning issues and serious policy statements such as the ending of council tax and free school meals. www.scottishsocialistparty.org. Verdict, they should stick to what they are good at as a political party and remember that it's the running dogs of capitalism in the press that decide who is to be a celebrity and not the individual so chosen. The press does this with the knowledge that setting you up sells papers but trying to knock you down in humiliation sells a lot more! And so to the new kid on the block Solidarity www.solidarityscotland.org. They have a colourful web site with lots of picture and graphic content. The site is federated in so far that all of the electoral regions have there own pages. It must be a characteristic of left wing web sites that have to be wordy. Headlines with a short background statement leading you onto a separate page per item would make their sites more attractive to the casual reader. "But haven't we always preached to the converted" I here you say.

Finally we have Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party at www.sscup.org. It is a rather dull site lacking political analysis and has a home page with the old Kitchener poster which does nothing to disperse their Dad's Army image. But to give John Swinburne his due they have a site with basic party information. Independent members with websites include Campbell Martin www.campbellmartin.org who provides some in depth items on national and local issues. Jean Turner's site can be found at www.jeanturner.org. It contains fairly basic information but does record significant work as an independent MSP who defeated New Labour over hospital closures, an issue that has resurfaced at the forthcoming elections. ■

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Kick Up The Tabloids

MPS APPROVE LORDS LOAN REPAYMENT SCHEME

As Scotland goes to the polls this May, there are three big issues which will determine where we place our cross. The union, the environment and the War in Iraq/War in Afghanistan/War on Terror/So-Called-War-on-Terror/War in Iran (tbc).

We are told we have to be extra-vigilant in the war on terror, after MI5 foiled the dastardly plot to kidnap and behead a British soldier. This strikes me as being a rather short-sighted act of terrorism as all it does is saves the MoD money. If these terrorists really want to gain the support of the public why not kidnap and behead a more valid target, such as Jade Goody ? OK, I realise there is a flaw in this argument, namely that Jade Goody without her head is going to be pretty much the same as Jade Goody with her head. Indeed, if anything, marginally more attractive.

The anti-war cause appeared to be winning all the arguments until the Army pulled the masterstroke of calling up Prince Harry to fight on the on front line. While most people's reaction was said "Harry on the Front Line? Aye, that'll be right". It did lead to a degree of pragmatism amongst several in the anti-war faction, myself included. Let's face it, if there are to be casualties in Iraq, they may as well be people who are least likely to contribute anything positive to society, such as the Royal Family. My own personal opinion is that they are not sending enough members of the Royal Family off to war zones. Perhaps they should send Harry's dad off to Afghanistan, not to fight but to talk the opium poppies into having a bad crop.

Harry's combat training would appear to have mainly taken the form of punching photographers outside nightclubs in London's West End. How that helps him deal with mortar attack, suicide bombers and US friendly fire is anyone's guess. What intrigues most of us is what uniform he will wear. The Nazi Afrika Corps number he's known to favour obviously will be suited to the heat and humidity of downtown Baghdad, but may be seen to a bit pro-Saddam for the third-in-line to the UK throne.

One's opinion on the Royals is, of course, very much a factor in whether one is pro or anti Union. Opinion polls south of the border now show a majority of English people are now in favour of Scottish independence. This will no doubt have the effect of convincing the majority of bloody-minded Scots to vote in favour of staying in the UK - just to piss off the English. What's the

point in independence if England is happy about it? Nonetheless, Tony Blair still thought it a good idea to visit Scotland to bolster his party's flagging vote. This left most voters totally non-plussed: "We're not voting for you, Blair. We vote Labour!" (Blair, incidentally, is still insisting that he will not be derailed by the Cash for Honours affair. Indeed, he has claimed that "it's business as usual". Which presumably means "keep sending, sorry lending, the money, and we'll sort you with a knighthood once the heat's off".)

On the subject of which, one of the proposals in the plan to reform the House of Lords involves making redundancy payments to peers who will not longer have voting rights. Or, in other words, paying their loans back. Meanwhile, as pro-independence parties continue to point to the wealth of sustainable energy available in Scotland, that totally selfless group of individuals known as the Road Lobby are less concerned about the future of the planet, as long as they can still have the right to sit in traffic jams. So exercised were they by the potential infringement of this most basic of human rights that they sent a petition against road tolls to the number website. Blair for some reason paid attention to this bit of public opinion, although it was only signed by two per cent of the population. How about the other 98 percent of us who think road tolls are a good idea?

Funnily enough when a million people didn't just sign an on-line petition but actually turned up on Blair's doorstep in March 2003 to advise him that the war in Iraq was a bad idea, he either couldn't be bothered answering or wasn't at home. The road lobby are bound to be further outraged by the new laws on using phones while driving. "Bugger, I can't send that text petition to Downing Street, because I'm still stuck in my car at junction 13 of the M8". Police statistics suggest that using our mobiles while driving is even more dangerous than drink-driving. This is sending out something of a mixed message to the people of Scotland..... "Fuck it, have another couple of pints before you drive home, it's safer than phoning to say you'll be late'... ■

Laugh ? I Nearly Voted featuring Paul Sneddon (aka Vladimir McTavish), Bruce Devlin and special guests from the world of politics is at The Stand Comedy Club in Edinburgh on Wednesday 7th March, Wednesday 4th April and Wednesday 2nd May at 8.30 pm



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