

North East Scotland by-election to European parliament

# Labour Party defeat could accelerate drive for Scottish independence

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Voters delivered a sharp rebuff to the Labour government in the November 26 North East Scotland by-election to the European parliament. As well as rural farmland, the traditional base of the Scottish National Party (SNP), the area includes the industrial cities of Aberdeen and Dundee.

In a seat previously held by their late deputy leader Alan McCartney, the SNP increased its majority by 33,701. It won 57,445 votes to the Tories' 23,445. Labour was driven into third place with a humiliating 22,086 votes.

The 20.5 percent turnout, down nearly 50 percent since the last Euro-election, reflects the widespread alienation from the Labour Party in particular and official politics in general.

Labour made immense efforts to win the seat. To a considerable extent, the 7.6 percent swing to the SNP from Labour is a verdict on Blair's policies that have deepened social inequalities. This was also reflected in the 2,510 votes for the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), the reformist party recently established by the Scottish Militant Labour group.

In the absence of a clearly articulated socialist alternative, disenchantment with Labour is being channelled in a nationalist direction by both the SNP and the SSP. Labour fought the by-election by defending their strategy of devolving limited power to the Scottish parliament, while raucously attacking the Scottish National Party's goal of Scottish independence.

Two weeks prior, Prime Minister Blair visited Scotland. He devoted two speeches to attacking the SNP's separatist policies. Blair attempted to exploit the growing concerns over the possible implications of secession, raising alarm over the SNP's policies on

Scottish citizenship, possible conscription under an SNP government, and invoking the long-shared history of England and Scotland within the United Kingdom.

'For the Nationalists, it is not enough that Scotland should succeed--it is also necessary that Britain should fail,' said Blair. On citizenship, Blair cited his own background: 'Born in Scotland, lived most of my life in England, of an Irish mother and an English father, both raised in Scotland with relations still here in Scotland. We are bound together so why set us apart? Why divide even our family from each other?'

Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown warned of the disruption to business under an independent Scotland. Four other leading Labour figures visited Scotland during the campaign, and much of their political machine was directed to reinforce the anti-SNP theme.

Labour's candidate, Kathleen Walker-Shaw, accused the SNP of racism because it encourages anti-English sentiment; comparing it to the regional tensions stoked between Flemish and French speaking areas of Belgium. Walker-Shaw was immediately gagged by the Labour leadership and subsequently made a scapegoat for the election defeat.

Divisions within the Labour Party will be exacerbated by the electoral rout they suffered. The Labour leadership has banned sitting MPs such as Dennis Canavan from being candidates for the Scottish Parliament. While Canavan is to stand as an independent, others already selected such as John McAllion, who share Canavan's long-standing support for Home Rule for Scotland, represent layers which cannot be relied upon by Blair to defend the Labour leadership's strategy for UK unity.

Immediately after the result, Labour dramatically

changed its attitude towards the SNP and independence in an attempt to come to some form of working arrangement. 'I don't think attacking Scotland is a good idea.... We should be trying to make the case for Scotland in Britain, not rubbishing an independent Scotland,' said John McAllion.

Scottish Secretary Donald Dewar announced that the powers of the Scottish Parliament, hitherto limited, might be increased. 'It would be absurd to pretend that ours will be the last word of every detail of the constitutional settlement. If, through experience and consent, we want to adjust the settlement, the machinery is in place.'

Liberal Democrat Malcolm Bruce announced that his party would be quite willing to work as part of a coalition Scottish government with the SNP. Bruce's only conditions were that the SNP would rule out a referendum on independence in the first term of the Scottish Parliament. In return, Bruce promised to work for 'greater autonomy for Scotland ... compatible with our partnership within the UK.'

For the SNP, leader Alex Salmond indicated a willingness to act within the framework outlined by Dewar and Bruce. 'Scotland is in the process of independence ... but to keep moving within that process we must make the new parliament work well for all who live here.' But, he insisted, 'The destination of our national journey is independence--all that is to be decided is the speed of our progress.'

The election result and the consensus amongst the major political parties in Scotland reflect a growing view in the ruling class that the unity of the UK is seriously in question. This is highlighted in a short report to be issued by the Commons Scottish Affairs Select Committee, which is dominated by Labour members, including McAllion, but which also includes Tories, a Liberal Democrat and an SNP member.

The report states: 'It is permissible to ask if it would matter, other than sentimentally to some, if the UK were to break up.' The document questions whether the Scottish Parliament will 'satisfy the legitimate national demands of the Scots and so preserve the unity of the UK,' and points to several sources of growing instability.

As well as disputes over tourism and inward investment, there is friction over the future Scottish parliament. The report highlights the '£315 billion of

state spending currently dispensed to Scotland. Any attempt to reduce the amount of money given to Scotland would obviously be bitterly resented in Scotland and might encourage further movement towards independence.' The report concludes: 'It is hard to see how a Scottish Parliament could be prevented from holding a referendum on independence.' It calls for regional government to be developed in England as a matter of urgency.

Four days after the election result, the British *Independent* newspaper noted the SNP's success and compared it the rise of the Parti Quebecois in Canada. It accepted the possibility of referenda in both areas. According to the *Independent*, this meant 'both Quebec and Scotland could be independent within 10 years.... Neither development would be unwelcome. We should rejoice in the new freedoms ushered in by a peacefully co-operating free-trading world.'

See Also:

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[24 October 1998]

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