

# Scottish parliament elections: Campaign indicates reversals for Scottish National Party

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Three weeks before the elections to the Scottish parliament, the *Scotsman* newspaper called for some political theatre to make the elections appear relevant to Scottish voters.

An editorial last Saturday noted that the main issue of the election--independence for Scotland--had essentially been decided. Opinion polls now consistently show that the Scottish National Party (SNP) has stopped making gains against the Labour Party. The *Scotsman* commented, "Scotland is not straining at the leash, not remotely keen, to make a unilateral declaration of independence. Our election campaign has not quite reached the midpoint and the fundamental issue has already been resolved."

The congratulatory tone is in marked contrast to the alarm sounded last year when the Labour Party appeared unable to resist the continual growth in SNP support. At that time, one opinion poll had the SNP in a position to win a majority of seats in the new parliament. This was due in part to a wave of scandals resulting from the Labour Party's decades-long domination of local government. But more significantly, it reflected the ability of the nationalists to win support from workers disenchanted with the right-wing trajectory of Blair's party.

The SNP has since moved dramatically to the right, to ensure that the party does not arouse the social aspirations of working people. Their previous calls for independence are now quietly relegated to a pledge to hold a referendum on independence if they form the government.

Two factors have come together to determine the position of the SNP. Firstly, for the past two decades the SNP promised that independence offered a panacea to the social ills plaguing workers in Scotland. Liberation from English rule, the party insisted, would

open the door for the implementation of the type of programme of social reforms attacked under 18 years of Conservative rule and abandoned by the Labour Party.

This talk has now been largely abandoned because it cannot be reconciled with the SNP's defence of the interests of big business. Since last year, when the party erased 114 pages of reformist pledges from its web site, the SNP has focussed its campaign entirely on winning the support of the industrial and financial elite. Rather than emphasise the imaginary social benefits of independence, the party concentrated on the benefits to business--low taxes, cheap labour, skills and infrastructure--that would bring new capital to the investment parks and finance houses of Scotland. While thousands of workers have lost their jobs, the party has quietly noted that Scottish business would suffer less with its own government, and that the SNP would quickly seek to enter the "euro zone" established by European monetary union.

The SNP's election manifesto has thus been forced to concentrate on the marginal policy differences it has with Labour, embodied in the "Scotland's Penny" campaign. The SNP has pledged that it will not implement the income tax cut of 1p in the pound announced in Labour's last budget. Instead, they say the revenue will be used to fund social programs. Along with cuts in local government services, this will release a small amount of money, £690 million, to pay for as yet uncosted improvements to health and welfare. The only spending they have concretely proposed is the ending of student loan schemes. In contrast, their pledges to business are more concrete--£207 million has been promised for small firms. Other proposals include the establishment of overseas trade embassies, the fullest possible integration of education into business needs, and the promotion of the multi-billion

Scottish tourist industry.

When the closure of the Kvaerner shipyard in Glasgow was announced, the SNP insisted that it would not seek to make "political capital" and quietly endorsed the government's policy of seeking a buyer for the site. The party's local candidate called for an order for the UK Ministry of Defence to safeguard jobs, skating over previous nationalist demands for separate armed forces.

The second factor involved in the SNP's backtracking on the question of independence is the hostile reaction to it from broad sections of the business world. The Labour Party has relentlessly campaigned on the dangers of separatism, despite having worked to promote the Scottish parliament. Labour have filled their party-political broadcasts with dire warnings about families split through independence. They point to the additional cost to business of a border between Scotland and England; the expense of funding a separate Scottish state structure; and the dangers of feuds developing over the military, taxation and North Sea oil, between the British parliament in Westminster and Holyrood, where the new Scottish parliament will meet.

This propaganda has proved effective because it contains a grain of truth. It is the divisive programme of the SNP--which is aimed at splitting the working class and establishing Scotland as a cheap labour platform for companies seeking access to the European market--that has enabled Labour to divert attention from its own right-wing policies. Labour's own pledges focus on the introduction of private capital into schools and hospitals, the continued use of workfare (work-for-dole) programmes and the privatisation of social housing.

Nevertheless, the apparent waning of SNP support, and the near unanimity between the major parties on all substantial questions, has provoked some anxiety in ruling circles. They are concerned that the pro-business policies of Labour and the SNP will find no real support amongst working people. It could well be that the voter alienation witnessed in the 1997 general election will be intensified in the Scottish election undermining the claims of all the parties that the new parliament at Holyrood is the starting point of a bold new democratic experiment.

The *Scotsman*'s call for a "late outbreak of political

controversy" is, however, tempered by the demand for a coalition government in the new parliament. "An absolute majority for any party would reduce the likelihood of Scottish politics developing the distinctive style and tone most voters appear to want ... and Scotland needs," the paper declares.

The *Scotsman's* concerns reflect the danger they perceive should the new parliament be quickly exposed as the representative of a narrow and very wealthy social layer. The same paper ran an article noting the existence of a "network" of around 100 Scots who collectively control all the levers of finance, politics and the media.

A Channel 4 television programme reiterated this. The presenter, Jon Snow, interviewed five "leading Scots" from the world of media, culture and sport about the "100 most powerful Scots". All the panellists appeared to know each other and were on first name terms with a considerable number of the "top 100". Of this elite list, Labour's Scottish Secretary Donald Dewar came out on top, ahead of Gordon Brown, the Chancellor. Other principal figures included media baron Lord Strathblane, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, film star Sean Connery, Alex Salmond of the SNP, the Barclay brothers, who own the *Scotsman* and various other business figures, writers, civil servants and newspaper editors.

Such were the incestuous relations revealed, that Snow, who looked somewhat embarrassed, had to gently remind the panel that class divisions did exist in "egalitarian Scotland" and that the top 100 had the appearance of an elite gentleman's club. He noted bluntly that whoever won the elections, "you lot will be running the show."

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