

UK elections reveal widespread disaffection with Labour

Coalition rule likely in Scotland and Wales

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British Prime Minister Tony Blair claims that the constitutional changes implemented by Labour herald a renaissance of "popular" politics. Yet the elections in Scotland, Wales and much of England last Thursday were characterised by the high level of abstentions and lack of broad-based support for the main parties.

Turnout in the elections for the new Scottish Parliament was just 56 percent, and only 46 percent went to the polls for the first ever Welsh Assembly. The situation was far worse in the elections to many Local Authorities in England, where just 26 percent of the electorate turned out to vote. One poll of 700 key Local Authority wards late Thursday evening showed that voter turnout was eight points down on the same wards in 1995.

The abstention rate is particularly significant given the historic character of the elections in Scotland and Wales. Since it came to government in 1997, Labour has set about devolving certain powers once controlled by Westminster, to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Scottish Parliament will be the first to sit in Edinburgh for 300 years. In Wales, voters were balloting for the first elected Welsh Assembly in history. Labour spin doctors presented the measures as a response to "popular" demand, redressing the "democratic deficit". But they are really aimed at slashing central government spending and encouraging competition between the UK regions for international investment. The government also plans to create nine Regional Assemblies in England, at some point in the near future.

The elections in Scotland and Wales were the first occasion in which a system of "proportional representation" (PR) has been used in mainland Britain.

In Scotland, 73 MSPs (Members of the Scottish Parliament) were elected directly, under the traditional "first-past-the-post" system. One for each of Scotland's present (Westminster) constituencies, with one MSP each also for Orkney and Shetland. A further 56 MSPs were then selected from "party lists" covering Scotland's

European parliamentary regions, through the Additional Member System, a form of proportional representation, which compensates parties that gain fewer direct seats. This system will return 129 MSPs in the new parliament to sit in Holyrood, Edinburgh.

The Welsh Assembly that will sit in Cardiff will have 60 members; 40 elected directly and 20 by proportional representation. Voters in both Scotland and Wales also cast their ballot in the local council elections.

In the last weeks, much was made of the "sea-change" British politics would undergo as a result of these constitutional reforms. With virtual unanimity between the main parties on all major social policy issues, the Scottish and Welsh campaigns focussed on the future development of the United Kingdom. Labour claimed that the "celebration of cultural diversity" would "strengthen the Union". In response to concerns from much of British business that outright separation would affect their profits, both the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru (PC), put the call for outright independence on the back burner.

The results, in the event, were far more of a verdict on two years of the Blair government. Labour's vote fell in many working class constituencies. Despite remaining the largest party in both Scotland and Wales, it lacks an overall majority in the new bodies.

In the run-up to the elections, Blair ensured that candidates favoured by their local parties, but considered "troublesome" by the central party leadership, were deselected and "loyal" candidates were imposed instead. As a consequence, several deselected candidates ran against Labour as Independents. In Falkirk West, in Scotland, Dennis Canavan beat the official Labour candidate by a margin of three to one. Canavan, who was expelled from Labour after announcing he would run as an Independent when he lost the selection process, campaigned on social questions, such as unemployment and student grants. In Glasgow, Tommy Sheridan, of the

Scottish Socialist Party--which also campaigned for social reforms--polled 5,611 votes and won a seat in the new parliament as a result of the PR system.

Govan, in Glasgow, home to the threatened Kvaerner shipyard, saw none of the four main parties proposing any means of saving the thousands of jobs hanging in the balance if the yard closes. As a result, some 55 percent of the electorate did not turn out to vote.

In Wrexham, on the border with Wales, three former Labour Party members who were deselected won re-election to the Local Authority as independent candidates. Labour lost several traditional strongholds to the nationalists, such as Islywn (birthplace of former Labour leader Neil Kinnock). Forecasts indicate that Labour's share of the vote--approximately 45 percent in the constituencies--would represent a sizeable fall since the general election in 1997.

In England, Labour lost its traditional heartland in Sheffield, which it has controlled for 75 years--with one brief interruption--to the Liberal Democrats. It also lost control of Stockport in the North West. Pollsters anticipated that the party would have lost between 1,000 and 1,400 local council seats in total.

In Scotland, the lack of an overall Labour majority will pave the way for a coalition with the Liberal Democrats in the new Parliament. Blair has long aimed for such a pact, as part of his project for new forms of "centre-left" government in Britain. In Westminster, a de facto coalition is already in operation, through the inclusion of the Liberal Democrats in some Cabinet committees. However, this has already met opposition from within the Labour Party--most notably from Deputy leader John Prescott. As responsibilities, and lucrative positions, in the new bodies are divided up, such an arrangement will become the focus for opposition from other Labour candidates now left out in the cold.

Moreover, a pact with the Liberals--who lost more than 100 council seats nationally--will do nothing to offset the increased gains made by the nationalists. In Scotland, the Labour-inspired press campaign against the SNP largely failed--particularly following SNP leader Alex Salmond's outspoken opposition to the NATO bombing of Serbia. The SNP recorded a swing from Labour of approximately 10 percent, making them the largest opposition party in the new parliament. Salmond immediately announced that the new parliament "takes this nation on to national freedom and independence."

In Wales, Plaid Cymru recorded even greater gains. Two years ago, they were considered a marginal party

with little support. In the referendum to establish the new Assembly, 75 percent of the electorate either abstained or voted against. In the present elections, however, Plaid Cymru have emerged as the second largest party and will form the Assembly's official opposition. Winning approximately 26 percent of the direct vote and 28 percent of the PR vote, Plaid Cymru took several formerly solid Labour constituencies, such as the Rhondda, on a 30 percent swing.

As the results became known, Labour campaigns coordinator Margaret Beckett claimed they represented a Labour "victory", as it was "the first time this century that any government has actually been ahead of the opposition in mid-term elections." However, not only is Labour's share of the vote based on a far smaller turn-out, the "opposition" she is referring to--the Conservative Party--is starting from a truly historic low.

After holding government office in Britain for 18 consecutive years, the Tories were drummed out in the last general election. They were completely wiped out in Scotland and Wales, and reduced to third place throughout much of England. The magnitude of their defeat has only exacerbated deep divisions within the party, which centre on Britain's possible entry into the European Monetary Union. For much of the election campaign, the Conservative Party was embroiled in bitter infighting over Tory leader William Hague's attempts to recast the party in a more "caring" light. Senior Tories openly speculated that Hague would face a leadership contest if the party did not make a recovery in these elections. Whilst the Conservatives gained approximately 1,100 seats, it was still far short of the 1,700 target they had set--signifying that the threatened challenge will, at best, only be postponed.

With all the major parties unable to address the pressing social concerns of the vast majority of working people, Labour's constitutional changes have only highlighted the widespread alienation millions experience from the official set-up. This sets the stage for greater political shocks in the future.



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