

Labour vote plummets in recent by-elections in Scotland and England

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Two by-elections held last week confirmed that the Labour Party continues to lose support in its traditional heartlands.

In Scotland, Labour narrowly retained the Hamilton South seat of Defence Secretary George Robertson, who is being ennobled and appointed as NATO Secretary General. The poll on September 24 was the first Westminster by-election following last May's ballot for the Scottish parliament. Just 41 percent of the electorate turned out to vote, compared to 55 percent in the Scottish elections, and 71 percent in the 1997 general election.

Labour received a total vote of 7,172, against the Scottish National Party's (SNP) 6,616, and its 16,000 majority in 1997 was reduced to less than 600. The outcome represents a 29 percent slump in the Labour vote and a 16 percent increase in the SNP's. Another significant beneficiary of the Hamilton poll was the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), who won third place, with 1,847 votes (9 percent of the total), placing them ahead of the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats. The SSP benefited from disaffection with Labour and championed limited reform measures focusing on a bill to end "warrant sales", by which personal debt is recovered by a forced sale of possessions and property.

In the by-election in the north-west English town of Wigan, voter turnout was just 25 percent and Labour's majority was slashed from 22,643 to 6,729.

The Hamilton result is particularly significant, because Blair's government devoted considerable energies to retaining the seat. Despite the constituency being one of Labour's safest Scottish seats in Westminster, half of the Cabinet visited the working class constituency, including Prime Minister Tony Blair himself.

The results were also particularly bad for the Liberal Democrats, who are part of the ruling coalition with Labour in the Scottish parliament, hence the collapse in their vote. They were elected on a platform of opposing the introduction of student tuition fees, but immediately backtracked. In Hamilton, the party lost its deposit and was reduced to sixth place behind a party organised by supporters of the local football team—Hamilton Academicals! In Wigan, the Liberal Democrats were also unable to capitalise on Labour's declining fortunes, coming in third.

Afterwards, Blair attempted to downplay the fall in Labour's vote by claiming that it was an achievement to have held Hamilton in face of the SNP threat. In fact, there was little chance of the Scottish Nationalists winning the seat outright at this point. Although the town was the scene of the SNP's first parliamentary breakthrough in 1967, Labour has since held it with a large majority.

The increased support for the SNP came as a surprise to the party. According to radio reports of the election count, SNP members were unaware of their relatively high poll until midnight, when they asked for a recount. Inner party disputes surfaced during the election campaign and at the party conference, which opened on the day of the poll. In the aftermath of May's elections, the SNP has become increasingly divided over key policy issues and its leadership was severely criticised for the relative lack of success in the first elections to the Scottish parliament, where it won 35 seats out of 129. Disagreements have centred on three main points: SNP leader Alex Salmond's public opposition to the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia; the party's official opposition to Blair's programme of tax cuts, in favour of a "penny for Scotland" policy; and the minimising of the issue of Scottish independence in the May

manifesto.

The SNP's difficulties reflect a more fundamental problem. The party has positioned itself as being to the left of Labour. By presenting Scottish independence as a means through which workers could win limited social change, it had sought to build electoral support amongst former Labour voters. At the same time, it has courted support from big business on the basis that devolution, if not outright separation, would provide them with greater profits. The two positions are irreconcilable, particularly since most major corporations do not support independence. Whilst the party remains in opposition it has sought to fudge the issue. But, like the social-democratic and Green parties across Europe, the nearer it gets to power the more problematic its balancing act becomes.

The low turnout also expresses disaffection with the parliamentary process itself. This was most apparent in Wigan, where there was no "left" alternative to Labour with any credibility. Yet it has taken little more than four months for the new Scottish parliament to reveal that it is just as indifferent to the concerns of working people as its Westminster counterpart. The 129 MSPs have voted themselves a pay rise, longer holidays, have argued over seating arrangements, the design and venue of their £100 million new parliament building, whether the parliament should have its own road and where lucrative government agency offices should be sited.

At the same time, the new Scottish government has attacked students, teachers, the homeless and people struggling to pay mortgages. During the Hamilton campaign alone, 800 job losses were announced at the Continental tyre plant in Newbridge near Edinburgh and 669 at two Levi-Strauss plants, one in the neighbouring constituency to Hamilton.



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