

Britain's general election: Lower than average turnout in Scotland

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The Labour Party won 56 of the 72 Westminster seats in Scotland in the 2001 general election. The Scottish National Party (SNP) won five, the Liberal Democrats ten, and the Conservatives just one. Although, on the surface, very little appears to have changed, the results express growing political instability and the deep alienation amongst very broad social layers.

In line with the election results across the UK, the clearest tendency in Scotland was the historically low levels of voter participation—down 13.2 points to 58.1 percent (1 point lower than the UK average), and the lowest since the 1918 expansion of the electoral franchise granting the vote to men over 21 and women over the age of 30. This abstention was most concentrated in working class areas, which have been represented by the Labour Party for decades, where the majority of the electorate did not see any point in voting, or did not agree with any of the parties on the ballot.

In Glasgow's Maryhill constituency, only 40.1 percent voted, a drop of 16.3 percent from 1997. Turnout was similar in neighbouring Springburn. Glasgow Shettleston, with only 36.9 percent voting, had the second lowest turnout in the whole of Britain, after Liverpool Riverside. Containing some of the poorest areas in Britain, all three seats were retained by the Labour Party with over 60 percent of votes cast. Voter turnout fell by 15.4 percent in the Livingston constituency of ex-Foreign Secretary Robin Cooke. The seat lies in central Scotland, where Motorola is preparing to sack 3,000 workers, yet none of the parties made the fate of Motorola's workforce an issue in the election. On June 8, the company announced another 50 redundancies.

Even in prosperous areas, support for Labour could hardly be described as enthusiastic. In the Edinburgh

Central constituency, which includes Edinburgh Castle and the famous New Town area, Labour's Secretary of State for Social Security Alasdair Darling won, but only 52 percent voted. The Liberal Democrats and the Greens largely benefited from swings away from Labour and the Tories.

The SNP, which in contrast with previous elections made no real attempts to win potential protest votes in the working class against job losses and social inequality, suffered serious reverses. In Glasgow Govan, for example, which the SNP has twice won in the past, most famously in 1973 in the aftermath of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders dispute, the Scottish nationalists lost by more than 6,000 votes to the sitting Labour MP and businessman Mohammed Sarwar. Despite the seat being an SNP target, Sarwar's share of the vote actually increased, although there was a 17.7 percent drop in turnout. Overall the SNP's share of the popular vote declined by two percent from 1997, to 20.1 percent. They remain the second largest party, receiving 464,314 votes throughout Scotland against 378,863 for the Liberal Democrats, despite winning five fewer seats. More dramatically, the SNP vote dropped 8.6 percent in contrast with the 1999 elections to the Scottish Parliament.

Even in its traditional rural heartlands, the SNP vote declined. The only Scottish seat to change hands in the election was Galloway and Upper Nithsdale, where the SNP lost to the Conservatives, giving the Tories their only seat in Scotland. The area has been badly hit by the foot and mouth epidemic, which has ruined small farmers across Britain.

Although they put forward calls for minimal reforms, the SNP's efforts in this regard are unconvincing given their pro-big business orientation. Neither do they appear to have devoted many resources to the

Westminster ballot, which it views as peripheral. Its main focus is on the next elections to the Scottish parliament in 2003. The SNP's central programmatic call is for greater powers and "fiscal autonomy" for the Holyrood, where it heads the opposition to the Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition.

For the Conservatives, who for the last four years have had no seats in Scotland, the 2001 election was another disaster. Although they won Galloway and Nithsdale, they failed to gain their principal target seats of Ayr, Glasgow Eastwood, and Edinburgh Pentlands, where former government minister and Scottish Secretary Malcolm Rifkind lost out to Labour. The rout exacerbated internal divisions, with proposals made for the Scottish Conservatives to split from their UK counterparts.

The main beneficiaries of voter disillusionment with Labour's attacks on the welfare state were the Liberal Democrats and the left nationalist Scottish Socialist Party (SSP). In line with the UK trend, the Liberal Democrats, who placed themselves slightly to the left of the Labour Party, increased their share of the vote by 3.4 percent from 1997, to 16.4 percent.

The SSP stood candidates in all 72 Scottish seats, and received over 72,000 votes, an average of 3 percent for Scotland. The party finished third in three constituencies—all in Glasgow—winning 10 percent of the vote in Glasgow Pollok. The SSP gained votes both from Labour and from the SNP by mixing nationalist rhetoric with proposals for social reform, advancing Scottish independence as a solution to social inequality. As with the SNP, the Scottish Socialist Party's efforts are primarily directed to the 2003 Scottish parliamentary elections. Tommy Sheridan, SSP leader and a member of the Scottish parliament, told the BBC, "We suffer from the fact that this is a Westminster election and we're a Scottish party."

A further indication of opposition to Labour's attacks on the National Health Service was the 7,572 votes won by independent candidate Jean Turner in a by-election for the Scottish parliamentary seat of Strathkelvin and Bearsden. Turner stood to oppose the long-standing closure of the local Stobhill Hospital. She collected 43,000 signatures to protest the hospital's closure and reduced Labour's majority in this prosperous Glasgow suburb from 12,121 to 7,829.



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