

Scotland: Labour fears electoral impact of antiwar sentiment

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9 April 2003

The May 1 elections to the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and some local authorities in England are the first to be held in Britain since the outbreak of war against Iraq.

In Scotland, the February 15 antiwar demonstrations saw 100,000 people on the streets of Glasgow, simultaneous with one and a half million in London. Many subsequent demonstrations in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen, Lerwick, and Inverness have attracted tens of thousands of people. Thousands of school students have participated in marches and walkouts and more protests are anticipated, including a blockade of the British nuclear submarine base at Faslane, 20 miles from Glasgow.

It is possible that mass opposition to war will have a significant impact on the outcome of the elections, with parties perceived as antiwar such as the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party, the Greens and the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) standing to increase their share of the vote at the expense of the Labour and Conservative parties.

Prior to the invasion of Iraq, Labour's junior coalition partners in the Scottish parliament, the Liberal Democrats, voiced qualms over the war's potential consequences and urged that it only be waged under the authority of the United Nations. However, once war broke out the Liberal Democrats have used every opportunity to prove their loyal support to the British military and have called for the war to be prosecuted as rapidly as possible. To the extent that they currently have differences with Blair and his Scottish first minister, Jack McConnell, it is on the extent of UN, and therefore European, involvement in a post-war colonial administration in Iraq. Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy has repeatedly pressed Blair in the House of Commons on this question.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) has also opposed war on the basis that it undermines the UN and prejudices Scottish based trading relations with Europe and the Middle East. In response to US and UK efforts to set "Old Europe"—led by France and Germany—against a pro-war "New Europe" of former Stalinist central and east European states, SNP leader John Swinney commented that Britain's prime minister Tony Blair "should be trying to unite Europe not divide it, and his objective should be to use European unity to talk the Americans out of an illegal war."

The SNP's perspective is for independence, or near independence, to allow Scottish based corporations and enterprise agencies to better fight their corner within the European Union. Swinney was invited onto the platform at the February 15 demonstration in Glasgow, where he called for the UN and their weapons inspectors to be given more time to disarm Iraq. The party also used some of their parliamentary time in Edinburgh to allow a debate in the Scottish parliament on the war. An SNP motion insisted that troops should not be committed without a UN mandate.

But the SNP has also been careful not to upset Labour too much. The party has bitter memories of the first Scottish parliamentary elections in 1999, which coincided with the US destruction of Serbia. During the NATO onslaught, almost alone of British political leaders then SNP leader Alex Salmond denounced the bombing of Belgrade as an "unpardonable folly". In response, Labour and the media unleashed a series of attacks on the SNP and warned of the potential consequences on Scottish independence.

Salmond resigned soon after the 1999 elections to be replaced by Swinney. After the US and UK invaded Iraq, Swinney has kept a low profile—ensuring that every muted criticism of the war that he makes is

punctuated with support for “our troops”.

A frank insight into the concerns of the SNP was provided by the former SNP MP for Govan, Jim Sillars. Writing in the *Glasgow Herald* in his capacity as a former assistant general secretary of the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce, Sillars stated that the attack on Iraq was a far greater crisis for British business than the Suez crisis of 1956. He warned that US and UK forces were heading “for an urban Vietnam”:

“US and UK relations with the Arab and Islamic worlds are ruptured. The double standards angering the Arab and Islamic peoples in respect of Iraq and Israel enrages them,” he wrote.

Sillars described Colin Powell’s recent threats against Syria as “insane provocation”, and warned of a radicalised generation of young people across the Middle East. The bottom line was the £10 billion of exports to the Arab world from Britain, now vulnerable to competition from numerous other countries not currently invading Iraq.

Both the Scottish Green Party and the SSP opposed war regardless of whether a second UN resolution was passed. Nevertheless, the Greens, who have one MP in the Scottish parliament, Robin Harper, has sought continuously to uphold the UN as some sort of guarantor against war. Following the first cruise missiles fired at Baghdad, Harper claimed that the global antiwar movement was “demanding that international conflicts be solved through the rule of law and the United Nations”. Harper has also called for a democratised UN, and hence the European powers, to be involved in running post-war Iraq.

The SSP are predicted to benefit most in the upcoming elections. Recent opinion polls have suggested that they might gain 22 percent of votes in Glasgow, and between 5 and 10 parliamentary seats, as against the single seat presently held by Tommy Sheridan.

The SSP was formed by former members of Scottish Militant Labour in an alliance with former Stalinists, Labourites, union bureaucrats, Scottish based members of the Socialist Workers Party and others on a nationalist and reformist program. Indeed the SSP is the most overtly separatist party standing in the Scottish elections. Led by Sheridan, the SSP has functioned as the left face of the Scottish Parliament since its founding in 1999.

The SSP are also active in the leadership of the antiwar movement and are seeking to bolster the powers of the Scottish parliament by pointing to its lack of powers to alter the deployment of troops based in Scotland, or decide of the use of military bases. Of other military bases in Britain, or indeed of the social circumstances and political development of working people in the rest of the British Isles, they utter not a word. The SSP combine this left sounding regionalist agenda with manifesto support for many of the social policies of the EU and a proposal to enter government alongside the explicitly pro-capitalist SNP.

Scotland’s *Sunday Mail* sought to reassure Labour that its fears of an “anti-war backlash” were unfounded. A poll conducted on its behalf found that while forty-four percent of Scots remained opposed to war, only one in three said it would affect the way they vote at the Holyrood elections and that Labour still enjoy a 10 percent lead over the SNP.

The poll was designed to contradict an earlier poll by System Three that claimed the SNP was in the lead. The *Mail* also insisted that support for the SSP was in decline.

The government could also take cold comfort from research published this month showing that a third of 18- to 24-year-olds say they will “never vote” in local elections, showing the level of disaffection with the entire framework of official politics.



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