

Labour facing by-election disaster in Glasgow

Steve James
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The resignation of David Marshall, the Member of Parliament for Glasgow East, has forced today's by-election in what was once considered as an unassailably safe Labour seat. But Labour is worried about suffering massive losses and there has even been talk of losing to the Scottish National Party (SNP).

This is an extraordinary example of the demoralisation that now grips Labour's parliamentary party. For the SNP to win requires a swing of 22 percent from Labour. This is significantly larger than the swings that have been seen in recent by-election disasters for Labour, but it is by no means impossible. Even if Labour hangs on, a dramatic reduction in the party's 13,500 majority in 2005 is a certainty. The most recent polls have Labour winning with 47 percent of the vote, but this is down 14 percent. The SNP is on 33 percent, up 16 percent.

All the parties are seeking to restrict debate to local issues and the local credentials of their candidates, but voters will rightly treat the by-election as a verdict on eleven years of Labour in power, the ongoing debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the greatest expansion of inequality in recent history. It will also be seen as an opportunity to pronounce judgement on Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Throughout Tony Blair's 10-year premiership, Brown was portrayed as a more traditional Labour figure, concerned with the circumstances facing working people. One year on, Brown has made absolutely clear that, just as when he was dubbed the "Iron Chancellor", he continues to serve the financial elite of British and international capital.

In the face of a rapidly emerging world recession, Brown has continued his policy of taxing working people through increased indirect taxes while bailing out financial institutions with billions in taxpayers' money.

Labour's crisis in Glasgow East also has an historic resonance. Labour has held Glasgow East, and its predecessor seat, since John Wheatley won Glasgow Shettleston in 1922 from the Conservative Party. Wheatley's victory expressed the turn by large sections of working people in Britain towards political struggle in the aftermath of the Russian revolution of 1917. Glasgow elected 10 Labour MPs at the time.

Wheatley was a worker from Ireland, formerly a miner, publisher and campaigner against war and slum housing. In Westminster, he denounced the policy of the then Conservative government to cut grants to child welfare as "murder." During the first Labour government in 1924, he introduced a Housing Act responsible for beginning the expansion of affordable local authority housing.

Eighty-four years later, Glasgow East stands as testimony to the

inability of the Labour Party to fulfil the hopes placed in it. In addition to the sitting MP in Glasgow Shettleston and most of the city's other constituencies, Labour has controlled Glasgow City Council since 1935 save a couple of brief intervals. Yet Glasgow East is one of the poorest constituencies in Britain, with a high rate of unemployment, drug addiction and youth violence. The area's health and life expectancy statistics are particularly damning.

Labour has abandoned wholesale its policies of limited social reform. It has become the preferred instrument for the financial oligarchy to pursue its interests in Britain and internationally. Locally, as in all areas it has dominated for decades, it is a vehicle for the self-enrichment of a layer of the upper middle class.

This was shown in the circumstances surrounding the calling of the by-election. Marshall, who resigned on grounds of ill health, has been a Labour MP in Glasgow East and Glasgow Shettleston since 1979. Before that he spent a decade as a city and regional councillor. He has variously been reported as "depressed" and "unwell". However, press reports attributed to "senior Labour sources" rejected the notion that his resignation was solely due to health matters.

Marshall is reported to be facing an investigation into some £220,000 of expenses claimed over three years, some of which has been directed to his own family members in return for secretarial duties. The issue has become controversial at Westminster with at least one MP resigning for precisely this activity. Marshall's decision came days after Scottish Labour leader Wendy Alexander was forced out following a standards investigation into undeclared private campaign donations.

Having been forced into a by-election it did not want, Labour struggled to even find a candidate. First choice George Ryan failed to turn up at a candidate selection meeting. Ryan, a long standing Glasgow councillor, was initially reported as having come under pressure from his family. Another story soon emerged. Ryan and ten other councillors had recently been reported to the Standards Commission of Scotland as part of a feud with market traders over the future of the 150-year-old market area.

Another potential candidate, also reported to the Standards Commission, was Glasgow City Council leader Steven Purcell. Purcell, heavily involved in Glasgow's plans to host the Commonwealth Games in 2014, reportedly rebuffed repeated requests from Gordon Brown to put himself forward.

Labour finally cajoled Margaret Curran into standing. Curran, a sitting member of the Scottish parliament for the area, has been suggested as a possible replacement for Wendy Alexander as Scottish Labour leader. She is a vociferous supporter of the Iraq war. As Minister for Social Justice, in the previous Labour

administration in the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, she has introduced a range of punitive measures directed against working class youth such as anti-social behaviour orders, youth tagging and parenting orders.

Working people seeking an alternative to the Labour Party will not find it in any of the parties standing. Although the SNP, which opposed the Iraq war, is likely to be the main beneficiary of a Labour collapse, the party is just as hostile to the interests of working people as Labour. Its policy of Scottish separatism is advanced to secure a low corporate tax investment location for major corporations and is contrary to the interests of working people, who require greater unity in the struggle against these corporations. In power in Holyrood for over a year, the SNP under First Minister Alex Salmond is committed to a referendum on Scottish independence in 2010.

The SNP has retained certain social concessions, despite mounting attacks on students, public services and local authority workers. But this has been possible only due to favourable funding arrangements from central government, which allow for a marginally higher level of public spending in Scotland.

This will not survive the onset of recession. Scottish-based financial institutions have suffered badly during the current world financial crisis. Both the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) and Halifax Bank of Scotland (HBOS) are based in Edinburgh. Over the last year RBS shares have collapsed from £11.50 to less than £4. The bank, heavily exposed in the US, has been forced to make a £12 billion rights issue, while attempting to sell off its insurance and transport arms. The bank's chief credit analyst recently warned, "A very nasty period is soon to be upon us—be prepared."

HBOS shares have fallen from £8.75 to £2.81 over the same period. The company has announced that 650 workers would lose their jobs, while the collapse in the company's financial position threatens millions of working people's pensions and saving accounts. A rights issue to shore up the company's capital base is threatened with failure because the share price has already fallen below the asking price of the new shares. The SNP—Salmond used to work for RBS as an oil economist—will seek to aggressively defend RBS and its competitors, as the jewels in the crown of Scottish finance. This can only come at the expense of the working class.

Two parties claiming to be socialist are standing, Solidarity and the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP). With their near identical programmes, neither represents any alternative to Labour or the SNP. Both put forward reformist policies similar to those abandoned by Labour, coupled with support for Scottish independence as advocated by the SNP.

Neither party has made any attempt to educate workers as to the fundamental issues they face as the result of the transformation of Labour into a right-wing instrument of big business. Instead they have focused almost exclusively on local issues.

Both are fielding long standing activists, Tricia McLeish, a council worker, for Solidarity and Frances Curran for the SSP. Curran's election pamphlet is entitled, "The EastEnder," which deals predominantly with community issues relating to Glasgow East, making only one single line reference to Iraq. McLeish raised the Iraq war in a radio interview, but even this was in a nationalist

context. She told the BBC, "I shall also point out that Scots troops are dying or being injured in large numbers as they make up one-third of frontline troops."

Much weakened following the split in the SSP over the libel case around Solidarity leader Tommy Sheridan, and the 2007 electoral wipe-out when the SSP lost all its six MSPs, both seek to give a left face to the SNP's perspective of Scottish independence. Both call for an "independent Scottish Socialist Republic". But their boosting of the prospects for social reform in an independent Scotland, with a population of less than five million, is little more than a series of minimal demands to be placed on the SNP—left phrases to obscure a right wing, big business oriented agenda.

The political reality behind the rhetoric was exposed by comments made by Tommy Sheridan at the launching of McLeish's campaign. Sheridan noted, "*We have got no problem with the SNP winning this election.* Solidarity will be pleased to see the demise of Gordon Brown." [Emphasis added]

The victory of the SNP, a tax-cutting bankers' party committed to dividing the working class, is not a step forward from the collapse of Labour. Rather the working class must develop a political strategy of its own, to advance its interests against all the parties of big business, whether they base themselves on the UK or Scotland.

The common interests of working people everywhere are pushed back by the creation of new nation states and the promulgation of all forms of nationalism. Workers in Scotland and England can only defend their interests by building a unified European and international political movement in defence of jobs, living conditions democratic rights and for the establishment of socialism on a world scale.



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