

Glasgow East by-election: Stark social problems, poverty

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A by-election is being held today in the constituency of Glasgow East following the resignation of sitting Labour Member of Parliament David Marshall. The seat, which Marshall held with a majority of 13,507 in the 2005 General Election, is a traditional Labour stronghold.

The Scottish National Party (SNP), which wrested control over the devolved Scottish parliament from Labour in 2007, hopes to take advantage of Labour's woes and win the seat in which it came a distant second only three years ago.

The seat covers most of the east end of Glasgow, from the Parkhead area east of the city centre to the outlying Easterhouse estate. It includes some of Britain's most impoverished neighbourhoods, and has become synonymous with urban decay and ill health.

The official unemployment rate in Glasgow East is more than twice the national average of 5.2 percent. But in total, around half of the working-age population of the constituency are without work, many of them in receipt of invalidity or disability benefit.

A survey by the Campaign to End Child Poverty (CECP) looked at the extent of childhood poverty across the UK, where children have nearly twice as much chance of living in a household with relatively low income than a generation ago. It found that Glasgow had the worst level of child poverty in Scotland, with a citywide rate of more than 50 percent. Around 60 percent of children living in the Glasgow east end, Bridgeton and Queenslie neighbourhoods were found to be living below the breadline.

No official figures are compiled on the rate of childhood poverty on the parliamentary constituency level. However, statistics from the CEPC on children living in families without someone in work and surviving on benefits provide an indication.

The Glasgow East constituency has the joint-fifteenth highest rate of children living in workless households in Britain, tied with the seats of Wythenshaw and Sale East in Greater Manchester and Knowsley North and Sefton East on Merseyside.

With 40 percent of children in the constituency living in

households without work, the figure for Glasgow East is twice the UK average and five times the rate found in the nearby suburban area of East Dunbartonshire.

According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the city has Scotland's highest rate of people on out-of-work benefits, the highest rate of people with limiting long-term illnesses and drug addiction, the worst problems with overcrowded housing, and the highest concentration of pensioners living below the poverty line.

Half of the adults in the area have no educational qualifications, and more than half of all households do not own a car.

Glasgow also has the lowest life expectancy in Britain. Data for 2004-2006 puts life expectancy in the city at birth at 73.7 years (70.5 years for men, 77 years for women), based on current life expectancy trends. The best indicators for the Glasgow East constituency point to a figure of 69.3 years for men and 76.2 year for women. This falls even further in the most impoverished neighbourhoods, such as Calton, with male life expectancy at a staggering 53.9 years.

A 2002 survey, conducted using the United Nations rating system for life expectancy, unemployment, incomes and rates of illiteracy, put the Shettleston area of the constituency as the most deprived in Britain. Nearby Baillieston, also in Glasgow East, was ranked seventh.

Statistics from the National Health Service showed that the east end of Glasgow had the highest rate of alcohol-related hospital admissions in Scotland. At 1,505 per 100,000, the east end of Glasgow had a rate of admissions more than three times that of the neighbouring suburb of East Renfrewshire.

Comparable social devastation mars many inner cities across Britain. According to the Office of National Statistics, life expectancy in the north of England towns of Liverpool, Blackpool, Manchester and Hartlepool are very similar to those for Glasgow. Analogous phenomena can be observed in the most depressed areas of European and North American cities. In the US city of Detroit, which has been devastated by years of car plant and supplier closures, nearly

half of all children live in poverty, with life expectancy rates in the city also likened to overall figures for some Third World countries.

Such is the combined impact of these statistics that some extremely distorted comparisons have been made. Much attention has been paid in the media to comments by the SNP's Westminster faction leader, Angus Robertson, claiming that the constituency has a lower life expectancy than the war-torn Gaza Strip.

This echoes comments frequently made by the middle class radical and pro-independence parties, Solidarity and the Scottish Socialist Party. These groups, which claim that Scottish separatism is progressive as it would free the country from "London rule," have made comparisons between areas of Glasgow and Gaza or even Iraq under US-led military occupation.

At one level, these comments are preposterous. Nowhere in Glasgow can one find occupying troops, missile and helicopter assaults. The city is not walled-off, there are no floods of refugees fleeing for their lives. The sewerage system and electricity work fairly well. Glasgow is a wealthy, and in some areas pleasant city, in an advanced imperialist country.

The primary aim of such comparisons is to portray the international phenomenon of urban poverty amidst great wealth as the result of an oppressive relationship between England and Scotland. It is used as an argument for Scottish independence. But an independent Scotland is increasingly viewed by sections of big business as a means of further demolishing social provision through slashing taxes, cutting welfare and enriching themselves from North Sea oil profits.

The deep social problems of Glasgow, or any other major city, are a product of international economic processes within capitalism that have opened up a devastating assault on the social position of the working class. The poor social conditions in much of Glasgow are a direct result of more than three decades of continual attacks on the working class, and provide a damning indictment of the historic failure of Labour.

Under the watch of the trade unions and the Labour Party, which has controlled the local council for decades, virtually all of the city's steelworks, shipyards and engineering plants, which once employed tens of thousands, have closed.

Between 1978 and 1993, the city lost two thirds of its 107,515 manufacturing jobs. These have never been fully replaced by jobs in the service sector. To the extent they have, many are part-time and temporary and offer poverty-level wages. Many of the low-wage call centres that have located in the city over the past 15 years have closed or are shedding jobs, moving to take advantage of even more exploited labour in Asia and eastern Europe.

Large areas of former industrial sites closed during the 1970s and 1980s remain undeveloped. This is especially so in the east end of Glasgow, which has benefited less from Britain's decade-long property boom and its attendant building activity than other parts of the city.

Heavy industry was once especially dominant. A couple of large retail parks today provide the main concentrations of employment within the constituency. One of these is the Parkhead Forge shopping centre, named after the site of what was once one of the largest metal works in Britain. Production at the forge was wound down for more than a decade with the complicity of the trade unions and Labour governments, until the works closed in 1975.

Several small community and health centres have been built, and there are a large number of recently built flats and houses, many of which are rented out by housing associations. There is a new college and a huge new shopping mall beside Easterhouse.

The constituency will host several events at the 2014 Commonwealth Games being held in Glasgow. A national indoor sports arena and velodrome complex is planned for the Parkhead area of the constituency, as well as an athletes' village with 1,500 houses and apartments. But despite the fortune that the city's building firms and service industries hope to make, only 300 units are scheduled to be turned into social housing after the games.

The area is also part of a £1.6 billion redevelopment project called the Clyde Gateway. This publicly and privately funded initiative aims to build 10,000 new housing units and 400,000 square metres of commercial property over two decades.

However, the scheme was initiated under conditions of a speculative boom in domestic and commercial property development, which is now coming to an end, casting uncertainty over whether the plans will be carried out.

In any case, such schemes cannot overcome decades of urban decline and the generalised assault on working class living standards, a process that can only intensify as the full implications of the global credit crunch become evident.



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