

Elections in Scotland, Ireland and Wales conceal extent of austerity cuts

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The May 5 elections to the devolved Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies are a political fraud.

Following suit with the British general election last May that brought the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government to power, all major parties are systematically withholding details of the profound social attacks that will be carried out regardless of the make-up of the next governments.

The regional administrations have already agreed to carry out their share of the £81 billion public spending cuts planned by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government. The minority Scottish National Party (SNP) government has outlined £1.3 billion cuts this year alone. Plaid Cymru and Labour in Wales plan to cut £1.8 billion by 2014-2015. In Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) intend £4 billion cuts over the same period.

Writing at the close of last year, Tom Gordon, a political commentator for Glasgow's *Herald* newspaper, accurately anticipated the nature of the coming elections: "...with no party daring to tell voters the truth of what the cuts mean for Scotland, no cash for manifesto giveaways, and personality clashes filling the policy vacuum, we can expect one of the most negative and dishonest campaigns since devolution".

The latest Ipsos MORI poll puts the SNP 10 points ahead of Labour. The nationalists are on track to be re-elected with 61 seats, adding a total of 14 seats, still short of the 65 required for an overall majority. Labour, whose support has collapsed from a 10-point lead in the polls since the launching of its manifesto in early April, looks set to lose one seat, leaving it with 44. The Greens are on track to double their share of seats to four.

The poll confirms widespread opposition to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government. The Conservatives are set to lose six seats and the Liberal

Democrats seven seats, reducing their total share to 10 and nine, respectively.

The SNP are fighting for re-election on the basis that the Scottish population can be defended from Westminster's social spending cuts through gaining independence or at least full fiscal autonomy. Their manifesto states, "We now know that financial responsibility, and indeed independence...will allow us to deliver higher levels of economic growth...and protect more of the things that matter".

Far from being used to protect living standards, the SNP would use such powers to configure public spending and assets as closely as possible to the interests of Scottish capital for the attraction of global investment. The class character of the nationalists is revealed in the backing they have received from Rupert Murdoch's right-wing tabloid, the *Sun*, usually associated with the Conservative Party.

If re-elected, the SNP plans to pressure Westminster to hand over powers to allow Holyrood to slash corporation tax, as well as to control Excise Duty in order to cut taxation on the whiskey industry. In addition, it proposes to introduce four new enterprise zones across Scotland, which would hand corporations handsome business rate discounts, loose planning regulations and capital allowances.

The nationalists claim that they will protect the funding of frontline services, as well as freezing council tax and water charges. They pledge to protect free care for the elderly, free prescriptions and free eye tests, while maintaining NHS funding with an additional £1 billion over the next four years. They promise to maintain free university tuition for Scottish students, reduce class sizes in schools, and lower teacher unemployment. On top of this they commit to no compulsory redundancies for public sector employees.

This is an exercise in political deception. The SNP is

already carrying out cuts to public services. Local government budgets have been cut by an average of 2.6 percent, and councils across Scotland have begun to shed the workforce and offload vital services and assets through privatisation. The SNP-led Fife council have made a total of 380 redundancies over the past year, 191 of which have been axed through compulsory redundancies in education, social work and housing.

The SNP has slashed the further and higher education budget by £200 million, and is in the process of dismantling the 2001 McCrone deal, which secured teaching staff pay levels, a 35-hour limit on the working week and 12 hours for marking and preparation. While promising to protect NHS funding levels, the nationalists are to axe 4,000 jobs this year, including 1,500 nursing and midwifery positions.

Scottish Labour, the main challenger to the SNP, makes similar overtures to big business, while matching nationalist promises on frontline services, council tax, and tuition fees. It also pledges to abolish youth unemployment over the life of the next parliament. The main policy that distinguishes Labour is its right-wing law and order platform, committing to protect police numbers, introduce a mandatory six-month jail sentence for knife-carrying, and pilot GPS tracking for serious sex offenders.

A recent report by the Centre for Public Policy for Regions at the University of Glasgow criticises all the major political parties for concealing “difficult decisions”. The report argues that many of the public spending promises cannot be paid for, stating, “Voters are entitled to be highly sceptical as to whether what they are being offered in the manifestos is actually what will happen, rather than a pale imitation of the difficult choices that await, post-election”.

The full magnitude of the social attacks that will be carried out over the next parliament will be revealed after the election. The SNP government has turned to ex-Scottish Trades Union Congress General Secretary Campbell Christie to head a commission on the “Future Delivery of Public Services”, which will outline a programme for the rationalisation of the public sector and the further dismantling of the welfare system.

An equally dishonest election campaign is being carried out by the political elites of Wales and Northern Ireland.

In Wales, Labour has recorded a substantial lead in the recent YouGov poll, which puts them at 49 percent of the vote, enough for an Assembly majority. Support for the nationalists, Plaid Cymru, who currently share the leadership of the Welsh Assembly, has dropped to 17

percent, falling behind the Conservatives whose support remains at around 20 percent. Both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats stand to lose a seat each.

Welsh Labour is posing as an alternative to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat austerity plans. Echoing Scottish Labour, their manifesto, entitled “Standing up for Wales”, pledges to protect the current level of service provision, including free prescription charges and free travel for pensioners, while preventing any increase in tuition fees for Welsh students.

All lies. At the core of both Labour and Plaid’s manifestos is the “Economic Renewal Programme”, rolled out by Labour-Plaid government last year. Its stated goal is to tailor public spending and assets to make Wales “a more attractive place to do business” through infrastructure projects, subsidising corporate research and development, while shaping education toward the demands of the market.

In Northern Ireland, due to the sectarian structures of the Stormont Assembly enshrined in the 1998 Good Friday agreement, there is no prospect of the election altering the current makeup of the leadership. Regardless of the election result, the key ministerial positions will be divided up amongst representatives of nationalist and loyalist parties via “cross-community” agreement. The incumbent government comprised of nationalist Sinn Féin and loyalist DUP is likely to be returned to power following the election.

Having drawn up and voted through a 2011-12 budget containing multi-billion-pound public spending cuts, the Sinn Féin-DUP government is now working in cooperation with the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government to slash corporation tax and transform Northern Ireland into an enterprise zone. There is consensus across the political spectrum and the business community for corporation tax to be reduced to 10 percent, below the 12.5 percent rate in the Irish Republic.



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