

Scottish National Party forms majority government in Holyrood

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The Scottish parliament at Holyrood in Edinburgh was sworn in Wednesday, following the May 5 election that saw the Scottish National Party (SNP) secure a ruling majority. This is the first majority for any party since the Labour government implemented devolution in 1999, and the result was unexpected.

The Scottish additional member electoral system, a version of proportional representation that includes a constituency vote and a regional list system, was designed to foster minority or coalition governments. But the nationalists picked up an additional 23 seats, giving them a total of 69 of the 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs).

A senior member of the SNP told the *Herald*, “We missed this coming...we didn’t even plan for this scenario.”

In some regions, the SNP came close to running out of list candidates as an unexpected number were elected to the 73 constituency seats, decided via first-past-the-post.

The SNP benefited primarily from the electoral ruin of the Liberal Democrats, punished by voters for driving through brutal social spending cuts in coalition with the Conservative Party in Westminster. The Lib-Dems lost 12 seats, over two-thirds of its support, leaving it just five MSPs. Leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, Tavish Scott, has announced that he will step down. The SNP were also able to take seats from the Conservatives whose leader, Annabel Goldie, has also stepped down after losing five seats, cutting the party’s share to 15 MSPs.

Scottish Labour, the main opposition in Holyrood lost seven seats overall, leaving it with 37 MSPs. In the early stages of the campaign, Labour claimed to be offering an alternative to the £81 billion in Westminster’s public spending cuts, two-thirds of

which were planned by the previous Brown Labour government. Then having fallen ten points behind the SNP, Labour shifted its efforts to attacking the nationalist’s plans for a referendum on independence. The central thrust of their criticism, however, was that a referendum would disrupt the economy and put off investors.

A major component of the SNP victory was the collapse of Labour in Central Scotland, West of Scotland and Glasgow. The SNP took five constituency seats from Labour in Glasgow alone—Annie’sland, Cathcart, Kelvin, Southside and Shettleston—with swings of between 5 and 12 percent. Overall, Labour lost 20 constituency seats, leaving only 15, with the nationalists displacing nine of its senior MSPs who have held seats for the life of the parliament. Scottish Labour leader, Iain Gray, who narrowly held onto his East Lothian seat, announced that he would step down in the autumn.

Of the other parties, the Greens maintained two seats, winning region list seats in Glasgow and Lothians. Margo MacDonald, a former SNP MSP turned independent, also won a list seat in the Lothians region. The middle class ex-left won no seats at all.

That the SNP is a right-wing, big business party is made clear by the support SNP leader Alex Salmond received from Rupert Murdoch’s *Scottish Sun*. The tabloid reversed its 2007 opposition to the SNP to support the nationalists in 2011, and ran a sustained campaign against the Labour Party—an easy target given Labour’s record—highlighting high profile evictions in Glasgow by the Labour-controlled City Council where large areas are being razed to make way for the Commonwealth Games in 2014.

The *Guardian* reported Salmond was an invited “guest of honour” at a dinner held by Murdoch’s News

International publishing company in April, the only Scottish party leader in attendance, and speculated on a secret meeting between Salmond and Murdoch in the preceding months. Murdoch is particularly supportive of the SNP's plans to slash corporation tax. The SNP were also supported by the *Herald* and the *Scotsman* newspapers in the recent election.

As the *Sun*'s campaign underscores, the main factor in the SNP's electoral victory was that the other official parties were so openly identified with right-wing policies. This meant that, despite planning to push through big cuts in public spending, the SNP was able to hide behind the record of the Tories, Liberal Democrats and Labour.

The nationalists' landslide victory does not indicate a sudden surge in popular support for Scottish independence, which still remains low at around 30 percent. A recent article on the *Economist* website commented, "You could look at Salmond's cynical, give-away campaign and speculate that he triumphed, not by offering an escape from English overlords in London, but the fantasy of an escape from austerity and the spending cuts that dominate politics down south."

Having already agreed to carry out its share of the £81 billion public spending cuts tabled by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, outlining £1.3 billion in cuts for 2011-12 alone, the SNP cynically pledged that they would insulate the Scottish population from Westminster's austerity programme through gaining independence or at least greater fiscal autonomy and lied about its own cuts programme.

The SNP government has already set in motion a wholesale rationalisation of the public sector, implementing multi-million pound cuts in education and local government budgets, and has frozen public sector wages for those earning over £21,000. The majority of these cuts are being driven through under the guise of 3 percent "efficiency savings" worth £900 million, on the back of £1.6 billion "efficiency savings" imposed last year.

According to a recent analysis by the Centre for Public Policy for Regions at Glasgow University, the planned efficiency savings over the next four years will result in the loss of 7 percent, or 40,000 of the public sector workforce (excluding health workers). The remaining workforce will lose 6 percent in the value of their earnings in real-terms. In the last year alone there

were 13,000 job losses in the Scottish public sector.

The additional financial levers sought by the SNP will not be used to improve or protect the social position of working people, but will be exercised at their expense to further Scottish financial and corporate interests by encouraging global investment. They plan to extend Scotland's borrowing powers, slash corporation tax to levels comparable to the Irish Republic, and gain control of Excise Duty in order to cut taxation on the whisky industry.

The SNP intends to use its majority to negotiate with the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government for greater financial powers through an amendment to the new Scotland Bill currently on passage through Westminster. Salmond recently announced that a referendum on independence would be put back until the second half of the new parliament, and would offer an additional option for "fiscal autonomy", while remaining within the UK. Any such additional revenue raising powers will be exchanged for a proportionate reduction to the level of the block public spending grant transferred from Westminster.

Despite posturing to the contrary, the SNP are fully in step with the Conservative-Liberal Democrat austerity plans. The devolution of additional financial powers, which the coalition is also pursuing with the devolved administrations of Wales and Northern Ireland, is seen as a means of permanently reducing the block public spending grants, which deliver higher per capita public spending outside of England.

Before stepping down as leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Annabel Goldie, in an interview with the *Daily Telegraph*, said that she would continue to work with the SNP to "get Conservative policies delivered." Upon hearing of the SNP's victory, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron sent his warmest congratulations and promised not to put "obstacles in the way of any referendum."



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