

UK general election: Conflicts intensify over possible hung parliament

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With just eight weeks to go to the general election on May 7, there is intense discussion in ruling circles of the implications of a rout for the Labour Party in Scotland.

Neither the Conservative Party nor Labour seem likely to win an outright majority in the election, with both running neck and neck in the low-to-mid-30 percentage points.

But even these figures do not adequately convey the alienation of many workers and young people from the official political setup that could see a massive abstention from voting.

There is widespread hostility to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government, which has imposed the largest spending cuts since the 1930s. However, few have forgotten that it was Labour that initiated austerity as part of its massive bailout of the banks in 2008. For the younger generation especially, Labour is synonymous with the super-rich and criminal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) has been the main beneficiary north of the border of this collapse in support for Labour. With the aid of the pseudo-left groups, such as the Socialist Workers Party and the Scottish Socialist Party, it has postured as a left alternative to the “Westminster” parties.

According to opinion polls, in May’s election Labour could lose as many as 36 of the 41 constituencies it currently controls in Scotland to the SNP.

Labour is forecast to lose Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath and Edinburgh West, the seats of Labour’s former Prime Minister Gordon Brown and former Chancellor Alistair Darling respectively, both of whom are standing down in this election. This would leave Labour leader Ed Miliband dependent on SNP support to be able to form a government.

This prompted the Conservative’s decision to make a possible Labour/SNP pact the target of its election

campaign.

This week, Prime Minister David Cameron unveiled posters depicting Miliband in the pocket of former SNP leader Alex Salmond. This follows an earlier poster depicting Miliband and Salmond outside 10 Downing Street (the prime minister’s home) under the slogan, “Your worst nightmare... just got worse.”

Just days before, former Conservative Prime Minister John Major took to the pages of the *Telegraph* to argue that an SNP-backed minority Labour government is the biggest threat to the “long-term unity” of the UK. Such a pact would leave Miliband “relying on support from a Party that will use every strategy it can to break free of the UK,” he wrote.

Last September’s referendum on Scottish independence from the UK was defeated by 55.3 percent to 44.7 percent. Despite the defeat, the pro-separatist SNP were able to increase their support in former Labour strongholds. The party has used its position to demand greater devolved powers, amid suggestions that a sizeable vote for the SNP in May could lead to another referendum on independence in the near future.

Major claimed that “the SNP would hold Labour to ransom,” paralyse government and ultimately lead to the “alienation of the Scots from the English.”

For all the efforts to frame the election in such nationalist and regionalist terms, what emerges more fundamentally from the discussion on the makeup of a future government is the common right-wing agenda of all the parties.

The Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats are all committed to greater austerity. In January, they overwhelmingly backed the Charter for Budget Responsibility, which commits any future government to ensuring the “balancing [of] day-to-day spending.”

It is estimated that this alone would mean additional tax increases or spending cuts of around £30 billion.

Justifying its vote, Labour said it was consistent with its pledge to “cut the deficit every year and get the current budget into surplus, and national debt as a share of GDP falling, as soon as possible in the next parliament.”

Yet having denounced Labour for signing up to Tory-Liberal Democrat spending cuts, the SNP has said it will support a pact with Miliband.

In the process, it has made clear that it is not opposed to austerity per se. Like the Tories and Labour, SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon has committed her party to cutting the national deficit as a proportion of GDP, arguing only that this should be done at a slower rate. The SNP’s miserly call for a 0.5 percent increase in “departmental spending” is balanced with plans for cuts in business taxes so as to “grow the economy faster.”

Sturgeon has also said she would drop demands for the cancellation of a new £100 billion replacement for Trident nuclear weapons stationed in the River Clyde as a precondition for backing Labour. This was the SNP’s main claim to be “anti-militarist”, having abandoned its 30-year opposition to membership of NATO in 2012.

Her statements underscore the pro-capitalist, anti-working class character of the SNP. It speaks for a section of the bourgeoisie for whom greater devolution, or outright separation, is a means by which they hope to secure a greater share in the exploitation of working people by turning Scotland into a cheap labour, low tax investment platform for the banks and major corporations.

Miliband, speaking at the Scottish Labour Party conference on the weekend, refused to rule out a deal with the SNP. While denying he was seeking such a pact, lest he worsen Labour’s meltdown in Scotland, Miliband did not categorically reject it.

Just as significant is the call by Conservative adviser Adam Tomkins that the Tories should consider their own deal with the SNP. Speaking to the *Sunday Times*, Tomkins suggested that Cameron could offer the SNP greater devolution in return for its support.

Cameron had shown he was prepared to make “big, open generous offers before,” he said, in forming a coalition with the Liberal Democrats following the 2010 general election. In return, the Liberal Democrats immediately dropped all their election pledges—including a pledge to veto increases in tuition fees.

Though Tomkins is considered a lone voice among Tories, his suggestion is not without precedent. As John Harris noted in the *Guardian*, it is in keeping with “recent Conservative history: the fact that in the Scottish parliament of 2007-11, the Scottish Conservative party

regularly supported the supposedly awful, evil SNP; or that late last year, the Tory leader in Scotland, Ruth Davidson, refused to rule out an SNP/Conservative deal at Westminster.”

Taking things further still, Conservative peer Kenneth Baker has floated the possibility of a Tory/Labour coalition as a means of avoiding the “constitutional crisis” envisaged by Major after the election.

Baker, education secretary under the Thatcher government, said that while such a deal was “unthinkable” at the moment, it would be feasible.

In Germany, the Christian Democrats have governed with the Social Democrats, he pointed out. Similarly, it would be possible for a Tory/Labour coalition “to find areas of agreement” such as “defence, counter-terrorism, infrastructure investment in schools, road, rail and in the reform of skills training and energy.”

Labour MP Gisela Stuart has backed a possible Tory/Labour coalition, which would be the first since the Second World War. In the event of a hung parliament, “I think you should not dismiss the possibility of a grand coalition in terms of regrouping of the main parties,” she told the *Financial Times*.

Ian Birrell, former speechwriter to Cameron, also suggested such an outcome. Writing in the *Guardian* in January, he revealed that it was one of a number of parliamentary combinations under consideration.

Faced with the impracticalities of a Tory or Labour-led minority government, he wrote, “a government of national unity” between the two could be just what the “country needs to reboot its anachronistic political system.”



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