

Scotland: SNP minority government likely

The big losers in the election were the smaller parties, including the SSP

Thursday 17 May 2007, by [McCombes Alan](#), [MILLER Alex](#) (Date first published: 11 May 2007).

In the May 3 elections to the Scottish parliament, the Scottish National Party (SNP) won 47 seats out of a total of 129 – a rise of 20 seats compared to the 2003 election. Labour lost four seats, emerging with a total of 46; the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats lost one seat apiece, winning 17 and 16 seats respectively. The results mean that for the first time in Scottish political history, the SNP won more seats than any other party, although not enough to command a working majority in parliament.

In the days following the poll, the SNP engaged in negotiations with the Liberal Democrats about forming a coalition government, but failed to reach an agreement, largely because of the Liberal Democrats' refusal to back the SNP's election pledge of staging a referendum on independence from the UK. The Press Association news service reported on May 11 that the SNP and the Scottish Green Party "have reached an agreement on how to work together in the Scottish Parliament", which will involve the Greens backing the SNP's Alex Salmond for first minister. However, according to a BBC report the same day, "the move will be a looser agreement than the one first floated ... The Greens ... will not be obliged to back Mr Salmond in a confidence vote or support the SNP's budget plans."

The big losers in the election were the smaller parties. The Greens, widely expected to increase their tally of seats, lost five seats, ending up with just two MSPs. The Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) lost all four of its seats, winning 0.6% of the vote. Solidarity, which split from the SSP in 2006, lost both of its MSPs, winning 1.5% of the vote. Solidarity leader and former SSP convener Tommy Sheridan failed to retain his seat in Glasgow.

There were widespread problems at the ballot boxes, with a "first past the post" system for constituencies operating alongside a "single transferable vote" proportional representation system in the regions, contributing to mass confusion and tens of thousands of unintentionally spoiled ballot papers.

Adding to the confusion, local council elections were held simultaneously with the parliamentary elections. Murray Smith noted in analysis at Newsocialist.org: "According to the BBC, there were 142,000 spoiled ballot papers, about 7 per cent of the total. This was due to the extremely complicated voting system and seems definitely to have damaged the smaller parties, probably not unintentionally. In particular it seems to have confused voters who wanted to vote one way in the regional lists and another in the constituencies. Who would those be? To a very large extent, those who voted SSP/Solidarity/Greens in the regions and SNP in the constituencies."

Despite this, the single biggest factor in the collapse of the small parties appears to have been a flow of votes from the Greens and the left to the SNP. Although the SNP fought on a "business friendly" agenda, and accepted large donations from millionaire businesspeople — including £500,000 from reactionary Stagecoach owner Brian Souter — it had headline policies designed to catch the eye of left-leaning voters looking for an effective way of punishing New Labour.

These policies included the withdrawal of Scottish troops from Iraq, the removal of Britain's nuclear arsenal from Scottish soil, and a referendum on independence. It was the Greens, the SSP, Solidarity and independents that lost the vast bulk of the 20 seats gained by the SNP. The SNP had a campaign fund of some £1.5 million; the SSP, by contrast operated on a shoestring budget of £30,000.

Commenting on the SSP's performance, Alan McCombes wrote in the May 11 *Scottish Socialist Voice*: "After the horrendous internal strife within the left over the past year, and with the socialist movement bitterly divided, the SSP went into this election in a brutally realistic frame of mind. This was a damage limitation exercise. At best, the party hoped to maintain a fragile toehold in Holyrood in preparation for better days to come.

"Yet no-one expected the sheer scale of the collapse of the socialist vote, down by 100,000 votes from 2003. The final tally of votes appeared completely out of synch with the attitude of voters on the streets and at polling stations, which was open and receptive to the politics of the SSP."

A major factor in the poor results for the SSP was the split precipitated in 2006 by Sheridan's libel case against *News of the World*, following which factions led by the Socialist Workers Party and the Committee for a Workers International left the SSP to join Sheridan in forming Solidarity, which fought the election on policies very similar to the SSP's. Solidarity out-pollled the SSP in the current election, picking up votes on the strength of Sheridan's new-found status as darling of the right-wing Scottish tabloids.

Despite the poor socialist vote, McCombes argued in the *Voice*: "As sure as the sun rises in the morning, the socialist left will be back with vengeance in the future. And whatever the arithmetical breakdown last Thursday, the only socialist party with the capacity of coming back from this defeat is the Scottish Socialist Party.

"The SSP fought this election with dignity and restraint. We also fought a highly political campaign, with a 450-point manifesto, including the boldest and most radical policy of any party in this election — free public transport.

"In contrast, Solidarity exposed itself as an embittered personality cult around Tommy Sheridan. The 16-point manifesto of the breakaway party, along with its other election material, prominently featured photographs of Sheridan, his wife and his two year old daughter. His name appeared on every ballot paper, including even for the local council elections.

"A large part of the Solidarity vote was an expression of sympathy for Tommy Sheridan based on confusion and misunderstanding of the facts that led to the split in the socialist movement, rather than a conscious socialist vote.

"Tommy Sheridan himself, in his manifesto, on TV, and at public meetings repeatedly accused the SSP of lies, dishonesty and backstabbing. That is the prospectus upon which Solidarity was created: that Tommy Sheridan was the victim of a plot to remove him as party convenor; that the SSP leadership manufactured allegations about Sheridan's personal life to justify his removal; that the party leadership forged documents to back up these allegations; that members of the SSP conspired to pervert the course of justice and in order to destroy Sheridan.

"The entire Solidarity edifice has been built upon this fairy tale, and will come crashing to the ground as the lies unravel and the truth emerges.

"In the meantime, for wide sections of the public, including for many ex-SSP supporters, there is no smoke without fire. The allegations against the SSP have not yet been disproved. At the very least, people are inclined to lay the blame equally on both sides ...

“Tommy Sheridan took out a libel action based on a fraud: at least some of the material published in the trashy tabloid News of the World was substantially true.

“The SSP did everything it could to dissuade Sheridan from this insanely reckless legal case. We predicted that this grotesquely selfish and deceitful course of action could lead to the destruction of everything that had been built over decades by hundreds and thousands of socialist activists.

“But Sheridan carried on regardless. He dragged scores of people into a legal toxic waste dump against their will. These included innocent people who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and have since had their lives destroyed to protect Sheridan’s right to hypocrisy.

“The SSP was also dragged into the Court of Session. Our response was to defy the courts and face down a jail sentence. In the weeks that the SSP was under siege, dragged through the courts, having its offices raided, Sheridan effectively went into hiding, failing to turn up to any of the meetings to decide tactics.

“The rest of the SSP stood valiantly against the courts. Finally, Sheridan emerged to argue that the SSP should now buckle under and surrender the party’s internal documents to the News of the World and the courts. His capitulation was backed by those who went on to found Solidarity ...

“But worse was to come. In an abysmal display of cowardice, Sheridan told the courts and the media that the documents had been forged by the SSP as part of a plot to fit him up. To salvage his fake reputation, he denounced the SSP leadership as liars, perjurers, forgers and conspirators, before walking out to split the left and wreck the socialist unity project, built up over a decade and more.

“The mainstream press, cowed by the courts and the threat of libel action — and perhaps also by the fear of jeopardising an ongoing police investigation into perjury and conspiracy to pervert the course of justice — have never been prepared to bring out these facts.

“As a result, the SSP was fighting this election under a cloud of suspicion. To pretend otherwise would be to run away from reality.

“However, two or three years down the road, the events of the past year will have begun to fade into the mists of history. With the removal of Tommy Sheridan from Holyrood, the Solidarity bubble will burst. That will be a massive step forward for the left, allowing Scottish socialism to be rebuilt under the clean banner of the SSP.”

P.S.

* From: International News, Green Left Weekly issue #709 16 May 2007.