

# Prospects for the Left in Scotland

## Vince Mills

THE EURO election results, especially in Scotland, confirmed the analysis and stance taken by the Campaign for Socialism. That, of course, offered little comfort to those who had hoped for some indication of a left-wing breakthrough and, for that matter, little comfort to those of us who would rather the foundations of New Labour were, at least, shaken a little. New Labour in Scotland performed in very much the same manner as they performed at the Scottish Parliament elections. Their vote went down a little.

They got 310,865 votes – 26.4%, down by 2.3% – losing one seat. But it was not by any means a bad result in comparison with the other parties. Something we shall return to.

By contrast the Scottish Socialist Party came 7th, behind the Greens' 5th and UKIP's 6th. They won 61,356 votes – a 5.2% share, up by 1.2%. Arguably this was a fair showing for a small left-wing party. However, given the hope that they might win a seat and the wider belief about their capacity to offer a route for social change in the foreseeable future, this result will, no doubt, be a cause for concern amongst the left beyond the Labour Party.

Why does New Labour continue to perform well despite widespread disillusionment over the Iraq war as well as cynicism about its performance in government in Holyrood? There are probably three reasons – ideological, economic and structural.

New Labour in Scotland as in England makes an unblushing direct appeal to working class conservatism, demonstrated, for example by their obsession with anti-social behaviour.

This is reinforced by the comparatively buoyant state of the economy. This needs some clarification. The Scottish economy has been, like much of Britain, transformed from a high skilled manufacturing economy to a low skilled, service sector economy. Further, there are areas entirely blighted by unemployment or with working people on disability benefits. However, within the limitations of this transformation, the economy has on offer plenty of low skilled, low paid jobs

and the ideological onslaught designed to squeeze workers into these jobs has been effective, especially in the light of the low levels of union organisation. It is in this sense that Brown has created "full employment".

One other effect has to be acknowledged when considering these results and that is the increasing fragmentation of voting blocs. UKIP took sections of the Tory vote. The SSP took sections of the SNP vote. The Greens probably took votes from the Lib Dems and Labour. In these circumstances, especially with the increasing use of PR, despite the historically low level of electoral support for Labour, retaining a sizeable slice of the vote means Labour is able to remain relatively dominant.

I think what the elections in Scotland showed is that New Labour here will remain dominant, in the relative way described, for some time to come and, therefore, as we have always argued, any real challenge will have to be mounted from within the Labour Party. Evidence of the possibility of a left recovery comes from two sources.

The first is the mood of individual party members. The left topped the NEC poll in July, taking the first three places, and Pete Willsman was close. The Scottish left candidate Irene Graham's vote was creditable and she managed to decisively see off the New Labour favourite, Mandy Telford, whose leadership of the NUS had given her hours of TV coverage. It has to be granted, however, that turn-out was low, even conceding the now officially acknowledged collapse in membership. The NEC was told in June that membership had dropped by nearly 50% to some 208,000 compared with 407,000 in 1997. A rough calculation suggests that only one in ten members voted. NEC member Ann Black reported that one website estimated it at 18%.

Secondly, there appears to be increased resistance from the biggest affiliated trade unions. The GMB decided to shift £750,000 away from the party to individual Labour MPs. General Secretary Kevin Curran cited the failure to push for new workers' rights in the EU Constitution or in domestic legislation. The T&G could follow suit, targeting resources into the key seats of Labour

members who back union policies.

The GMB's announcement came scarcely a week after a statement by the Amicus General Secretary Derek Simpson that the policies of the New Labour government could lose Labour the next election, in what was tantamount to a call for Blair to go. Simpson is concerned about a number of issues. The decline of manufacturing jobs, pensions and, along with Tony Woodley of the T&G, Blair's insistence on keeping increased union rights out of the European Charter.

Only Unison of the big four has yet to pronounce on the European Constitution, but it is unlikely they can do anything other than oppose it given the leadership's position on the Charter of Human Rights. This opens opportunities for the left in the party to build radical alliances with the affiliated unions.

In Scotland the Campaign for Socialism has tried to move the alliance between CLP activists and the trade unions beyond rhetoric. We are working jointly with several of the affiliated unions, most notably Unison, to mount a campaign called Revitalise the Labour Party. We organised a major conference in October. While the focus was on democratic issues for the Scottish Labour Party conference in March our aim is also to try and increase left representation on the Scottish Labour Party executive. The agenda is still limited, from a socialist point of view, but it opens the door to re-engaging union activists with party structures and party activists and could lead to increased activity in the CLPs.

Contrast this to the approach of the SSP. In the current issue of *Scottish Left Review* academic and SSP member Gregor Gall produces a very

honest attempt to consider the role of the unions in relation to the SSP:

"Consequently, it may be more sensible to see the realignment of the left and unions as a long-term project which should not be judged in the short-term on just whether it can deliver large-scale political representation on a par with that which hypothetically exists with Labour. The appropriate historical parallel here would be the twenty to thirty years that it took for the Labour Party to become an effective political force at the beginning of the twentieth century.... The SSP as the most advanced political formation to the left of Labour lacks the credibility of critical mass because of its relatively small size. Quite apart from only operating in Scotland (sic), without further union affiliation and support, other unions will not see the SSP as a credible option. Moreover, and without further union support, the SSP will not grow to the extent that it would need to in order to present itself a genuinely mass party of the working class." ('The Price of Influence', *Scottish Left Review*, July-August 2004.)

The continuing crises over Iraq will create more difficulties for New Labour. Many of those both here in Britain and abroad do not have the luxury of waiting the twenty or thirty years Gregor Gall believes necessary to build a movement capable of radical action. We need to use the movement that has already been built by generations of Labour activists to deliver peace and social justice here and now. New Labour's discomfort and the unions' increased hostility should be seen by the left as an opportunity to build new alliances and make new advances building up to the Scottish Labour Party conference in Dundee in March. ■

# Campaign for Socialism

*the left organisation of the Scottish Labour Party*

## AIMS

- To promote Labour as a party committed to socialism on the basis of common ownership of the means of production, distribution & exchange
- To campaign within the party for a democratic, comprehensive and accountable public sector; full employment; socialised medicine, transport and education; common ownership of the public utilities and an extension of common ownership in the banking and financial institutions; a reinvigorated and devolved system of local government; a parliament in Scotland; and the elimination of poverty and injustice
- To determine socialist policies for Labour in government – socialist policies that will build the sound planned economy needed to ensure equality and social justice
- To act as an organisational focus for all those within the party and Labour movement who agree with the above aims, and wish to see them form the basis of the party's approach to policy making

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