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Scotland

# Scottish Socialists make gains in elections

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**The Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) increased its representation in the Scottish Parliament from 1 Member of Scottish Parliament (MSP) in 1999 to 6 in the election held on 1st May 2003. Following the election, the most prominent media coverage was of Rosie Kane, the newly elected SSP MSP for Glasgow, promising to put the 'Rude' into Hollyrood (the location of the Scottish Parliament), and then taking the oath to the queen (under protest) dressed in jeans and with "my oath is to the people" written on her upheld palm.**

The 4 years of the media portraying the SSP as a one-man band, as Tommy Sheridan's party, are clearly over. Scotland has now officially a six-party parliament, with the SSP entitled to representation on all its committees.

## Scotland since 1999

This was only the second election to the Scottish Parliament since 1707. A referendum in 1979 endorsed the creation of a new parliament with limited powers devolved from the UK government. Whilst the parliament has control over health, education, local government, transport, the police and the environment, the UK government retains control over the economy, defence and foreign policy. It even controls the rules for the Scottish parliament, and limits its expenditure by means of grants and by preventing it from raising its own taxes.

The 1999 elections were held under a form of proportional representation. The results over-represented the Labour Party yet, significantly, denied it an overall majority. Labour was forced into coalition with the Liberal Democrats, who have formed the government for the last 4 years. The 1999 elections also gave the Scottish Socialists and the Greens a single MSP each out of a total of 129 MSPs in the parliament.

The Scottish government has disappointed those who hoped it would start to reverse social deprivation in Scotland. Led by Labour, it has with few exceptions followed the UK government policies - particularly in privatising public services. Labour's junior partners, the Liberal Democrats, have been indistinguishable from Labour in terms of policy.

The main opposition party, the Scottish National Party, has moved steadily to the right over the past years, endorsing the 'enterprise culture' and seeking to cut business taxes. It remained pro independence, but within the EU and the Euro, thus expressing an aspiration rather than a demand. The final official party, the Conservative Party, often complains that Labour has stolen its policies.

In the run up to the elections we had four major parties who were all pro-business, and whose manifestoes were identical on most main policies.

## The SSP to 2003

Scottish Socialist Party demonstration, Edinburgh

The SSP was formed from the Scottish Socialist Alliance in the lead up to the 1999 elections. It quickly consolidated most of the forces on the far left around a common programme, and targeted winning a seat in Glasgow in 1999.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/29ssy.jpg>]

Its success in getting Tommy Sheridan elected was due as much to Tommy's prominence in opposition to the Poll Tax and other working class struggles as the SSP itself. In 1999 the SSP had around 400 members and attracted 46,600 votes - 2% of the total. Fortunately, 18,600 of these were in Glasgow - 7.25% of Glasgow votes.

Following the success in 1999, the SSP rapidly recruited members and strengthened its campaigning activity. Having an MSP greatly increased our profile, particularly by our success in (i) constructing a cross party majority in favour of abolishing Warrant Sales (a barbaric legal measure whereby debtors' household goods are publicly seized and auctioned) - a punitive measure inflicted on around 40,000 poor Scottish households a year; and (ii) moving a bill to abolish charges for meals in schools.

In 2001 the SWP members in Scotland joined the SSP, and the party began to reorganise its internal structures and constitution to reflect its growth. At the 2001 UK general election, the SSP got 72,500 votes - 3.1% of the total.

The new SSP constitution provided for the National Executive and standing committees to be fully elected by annual conference, and for a bigger National Committee consisting largely of branch delegates, to decide policy between conferences. Electoral systems were adopted to ensure 50/50 male female representation on most bodies, and as candidates in public elections. By the end of 2002, SSP membership was around 2,500, and we had about 70 local branches.

Throughout 2002, opinion polls showed SSP support at around 4% in the first vote, and above 6% in the crucial 2nd proportional vote for the Scottish Parliament. The SSP continued to be involved in every campaign across Scotland - most noticeably around the firefighter's dispute: significant numbers of firefighters joined the party at the beginning of 2003. The SSP has continued to take up international campaigns, and to participate in the moves towards left regroupment in Europe. Frances Curran, the international officer for the SSP and newly elected MSP, was an observer at the Fourth International's World Congress.

## The Iraq War

After 9/11, the SSP founded the Coalition for Justice not War, and led the opposition to the Iraq war. Groups were set up in every community - school kids went on strike. The Green Party were also opposed to the war, but they have only around 150 members across Scotland.

As the scale of opposition to the war became apparent, with 100,000 marching in Glasgow, the mainstream parties began to shift their positions. The SNP came closer to outright opposition to the war: their leader actually changed his stance whilst on the platform at the rally - as did the Liberal Democrats. Only the Labour Party and the Tories refused to oppose the war in the parliament. Labour support collapsed in opinion polls, and it looked as if they would lose the election. SSP support in polls peaked at 10%, and the Greens at 8%.

Fortunately for Labour, Baghdad fell 3 weeks before the election, and public opinion bounced back.

## The election campaign

Because of the war, press coverage of the Scottish elections was confined to the last 3 weeks, and even then was

limited in scale compared to 1999.

In Glasgow and Edinburgh, the SSP was the most prominent of any party in public campaigning. Overall the SSP ran its best organised campaign. 4 million leaflets were distributed, 2 to each household; 2 party political videos were produced to a high standard and shown on 3 TV channels; and funds were raised sufficient to cover the campaign.

The key immediate policies of the SSP were: against the war; abolish the regressive Council Tax and replace it with a form of progressive income tax; free school meals; oppose privatisation; for a Â£7.32 minimum wage and 35 hr week in the public sector. The main SSP slogan is for an Independent Socialist Scotland.

Because of the vagaries of the opinion polls - SSP support seemed to slip to 6% when Baghdad fell, then bounced back to 9% - and because of peculiarities of the voting system, it was unclear how many seats the SSP would get. The actual outcome of the election surprised all commentators..

The SSP took 6 seats, the Greens 7 (both up from 1); independent campaigners got 4 seats.

The big losers were Labour and the SNP, who lost 6 and 8 seats respectively. Significantly, only 1.9 million voted - around 450,000 less than in 1999. The SSP vote increased to 128,000, (6.8%). Moreover our vote remained solid across the 2 votes for the parliament: there was little sign of the expected pick up of votes for the 2nd proportional list vote. 2% of voters who, according to polls, were about to vote SSP, seem to have voted for independents who took 9% of the vote. In Glasgow the SSP got 31,000 votes: 16% of the total votes. To put this in perspective, the SSP vote across Scotland was higher than any avowedly socialist party has got in Scotland since 1918, beating the Independent Labour Party vote in 1935.

The Greens, having barely campaigned, were big winners, getting 7 seats with slightly less votes than the SSP. Although the SSP has strong environmental policies, it was expected that many of these Green voters would reject some of the SSP's socialist policies. Many of the Green MSPs are socialist, and we expect to cooperate on many issues.

## A strengthened SSP

During the war and the lead up to the election, the SSP recruited hundreds of new members. A key task is to consolidate these members and provide an internal programme of education.

Having a team in parliament gives the party access to funds for offices and personnel, and this will raise the SSP profile across Scotland. More important, the MSPs will be able to take up issues affecting the poor and disadvantaged across Scotland.

The SSP is fortunate in that the 6 MSPs elected, 4 women and 2 men, include a wealth of experience in trades unions, and in environment and political campaigns. There are no illusions that parliamentary action alone can change society; however, the SSP has effectively combined community and direct action with parliamentary work. The challenge is to take this to a higher level of struggle and coordination.

The SSP has strengthened its base within the trade union movement in Scotland, so that a number of left union leaders supported us through the campaign. Over the coming period we are looking to break the trades unions'

subservience to Labour policies - and break also their direct funding of the Labour party.

# Towards a mass socialist party

The SSP leadership is well aware of the danger of assuming we will continue to grow and gain support. Up till now we have not been seen as a threat to the establishment or capitalism and so have been reasonably unchallenged. Already now we see campaigns of vilification in the media, and these are likely to intensify.

Whilst these attacks may affect the looser parts of our support, the main defence is to strengthen the party's campaigning, its links to the wider community and its internal education of its members. Alongside this we need to improve our research and analysis into the workings of capitalism in Scotland and Europe. Part of the benefits of having the resources granted to MSPs is the ability to set up a research unit to advance this process.

The challenge of growing from around 7% support across Scotland to the 15% support we have in Glasgow and to directly challenge the capitalist parties - is daunting but exciting. There are clearly risks of setbacks along the way, but as yet the SSP remains a socialist organisation committed to the overthrow of capitalism. An open discussion will ensue over the summer amongst Marxists in the SSP as to how best, or indeed whether there is a need, to organise to ensure the party remains committed to socialist revolution.

The challenges facing the SSP are common to those faced by Rifondazione in Italy and other groups across Europe; and we intend to continue working with them towards achieving international socialism.

Alan McCoombes, editor of the SSP paper, sums up the situation as follows: " We are still a young party, challenging centuries of tradition and prejudice. Despite our breakthrough, we have at our disposal a bare fraction of the resources of the mainstream parties. But we have morale on our side. We know where we are trying to go, even though we have not yet worked out all the details of how we get there.

"We have a long road to travel. But at least we have begun the journey."