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Scotland

Neither celebration nor despondency

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The European election in Scotland had none of the high drama or excitement of the Holyrood election [to the Scottish assembly] last year. Both the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and the Greens had hoped to make a breakthrough into the European Parliament. Several polls had predicted that the UK Independence Party would take 11 per cent of the vote. But when the votes were finally tallied up, there was virtually no change in the arithmetic of the Scottish contingent of MEPs.

Labour's representation was reduced from three to two. The SNP and Tories each retained two seats, while the Liberal Democrats held onto their single seat. For the SSP, these results are neither a cause for celebration nor a reason for despondency. The 5.2 per cent vote for the SSP represented a slight decrease in our proportion of the vote compared to the Scottish election in 2003. But it also represented a significant increase compared to the last UK-wide election we fought, the Westminster election in 2001, when the SSP took three per cent.

The SSP ran by far the strongest and most visible campaign on the ground of all the parties. The feedback on the streets was of growing support for the party. But it is not always possible to convert sympathy into votes. On this occasion, the SSP suffered from the sharply contrasting levels of participation in the election based on social class.

In the plush, suburban Eastwood seat, almost 25,000 people voted. But in the run down Glasgow Shettleston constituency ("the poverty capital of the UK") fewer than 10,000 voted. In other Glasgow constituencies with high levels of poverty such as Baillieston, Maryhill and Springburn, the total turnout was just above 10,000. Yet in three affluent Edinburgh seats, the turnout soared above 21,000. In each of the rural constituencies of Inverness, Gordon, Perth, Strathkelvin and Tayside North, more than 20,000 votes were cast.

Much of the core vote of the SSP consists of low paid workers, council tenants, lone parents and people on disability and unemployment benefit. For a lone parent living in a damp council flat and battling against poverty and debt, the European parliament might as well be located on the planet Jupiter for all the relevance it has to their daily lives. Participating in an election to send an MEP to sit in a parliament 1,000 miles away in Strasbourg is never going to be a burning priority for people living on the breadline.

There is another important strand of the core SSP vote. Over the past few years a large swathe of young, educated voters have swung to the SSP because of our hard-line opposition to war and imperialism. Many of these young people did turn out to vote SSP in protest against the occupation of Iraq. But the anti-war vote in Scotland was spread among four parties. The Liberal Democrats, in particular, benefited from the UK-wide focus of most of the media coverage of the European election.

Night after night, TV news bulletins reported on the election as though it consisted of a battle involving four parties: Labour, the Tories, the Liberal Democrats and the UK Independence Party. There was the occasional reference also to the Greens and the British National Party (BNP). Scottish coverage of the election was negligible. As a result, the SSP and even the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) were marginalized by much of the media. Day in, day out Scottish viewers were assailed with footage of Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy calling for a vote for his party to protest against the war, even though the Liberal Democrats in Scotland have played no role whatsoever in campaigning against the slaughter and torture in Iraq.

Many SNP activists appeared to have consciously abstained from activity in this election, hoping for a poor result in order to bring down party leader John Swinney. The party slumped below 20 per cent of the vote and Swinney

subsequently resigned.

Despite the further erosion of SNP support, this election nonetheless provides a further glimpse of the political gulf that separates Scotland and England. South of the border, the combined right wing parties of Michael Howard's Tories, the UK Independence Party and the BNP took around half the total vote. In Scotland, these parties took barely a quarter of the vote. By subtly distancing itself from Tony Blair, Scottish Labour has managed to avert the collapse suffered by the party down south. Since the shock results for Holyrood last year, Scottish Labour leader Jack McConnell and his colleagues have gone to great lengths to avoid discussion of the war in Iraq. They have spurned the racist demagoguery of the likes of Home Secretary David Blunkett, and rejected the more contentious Blairite plans for education and the NHS. Yet the SSP and the Greens remain a force to be reckoned with, and the SNP could regain lost ground under a new leader.

For the SSP, this European election was always going to be a difficult contest. This was an artificial election, skewed in favour of middle class and rural Scotland. Yet the SSP has managed to stand its ground. Although there will be understandable disappointment that we were unable to break into the European Parliament this time round, the party remains in strong shape to face up to the more important battles that lie ahead over the next three years.