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Scotland

The Future of the Left in Scotland

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Elections to the Scottish Parliament took place on May 5, along with many other elections in different parts of Britain . The results for the new organisation on the Scottish left, RISE, which brings together a lot of activists who worked for a Yes vote in the Scottish referendum with the Scottish Socialist Party, were disappointing. Prominent RISE activist Johnathan Shafi explores some of the reasons and lessons for the future.

Elections are always difficult for the far left, and particularly difficult in post-referendum Scotland where so much of the socialist inclined vote is soaked up by the SNP, and the Greens, who have deservedly returned more MSPs.

But the process involved in getting this far has led to the development of an entirely new generation of socialist activists. These people have worked against the odds, with minimal resources and with a short time scale and are focussed on moving the project forward. They are a source of inspiration, but more than that, I fully believe them and many more who will join their ranks to be the future of the Scottish left. Their skill, togetherness and talents will make an impact on Scottish politics. There is no doubt about it.

Those young activists are coupled with the re-engagement of a cross section of experienced socialists as a result of the process of renewal and alliance building. These veterans of the movement have seen many a difficult election, but now they can see real potential to develop again, with years ahead to grow and debate strategy.

In addition, the candidates were outstanding, dignified and drawn from diverse backgrounds. They are a credit, and have a big future ahead. They had the guts to stand up and promote an irreverent socialist campaign, and had the courage of their convictions in a difficult political atmosphere. Many were moved to tears by their struggle and determination to make sure the lives of ordinary people were heard in the debate.

Their time will come. When it does, this experience will be looked back on as an important learning curve.

Registering where we made mistakes

We in RISE made three major strategic miscalculations. Firstly, we imagined the organic base of a new pro-indy left organisation to be far larger than it was. By the time we had launched, the energy of the referendum had been incubated in the SNP. This may have been different if we had launched in the days after September 18th 2014, but even then, the result of the No vote was to begin a long, Cold War, as opposed to the Scottish spring that would have emerged post Yes.

Secondly, we convinced ourselves of there being political space for the far left in an election where the SNP, Labour and the Greens were all competing for the radical vote. Imagine that, underwritten by the national question, which would boost the SNP even if they did slide to the centre. In 1999 and 2003 when the SSP broke through, the space for the radical left was much more accessible.

RISE in amongst this, given we had just four months to electioneer, and tiny resources in comparison to others actually managed to compete well on the campaign phase, but on the night the results in black and white highlighted the difficulties this election brought. Even if we had run the perfect campaign, and had good luck along the way, we may have added another percentage point or so on to the vote. The objective circumstances matter, and force of will cannot turn the tide of elections.

Thirdly, we believed that the election could be fought on the basis of ideas, when in fact it was always going to be a highly tactical election. In the early stages of RISE in late 2015 we seemed to be at the centre of a storm around tactical voting. There was a stream of derision focussed on RISE for 'vote splitting'. Unfortunately, despite our best efforts to move on to different footing after our policy conference in December, it stuck as a constant reference point. This also gripped us in a permanent war footing in relation to the SNP at a time when vast numbers of left-wingers are casting their vote for them. That said, we were right to expose the weakness of the SNP policy platform and campaign approach – that will count in the future.

These strategic problems were combined with the every day difficulties involved in competing for votes with limited time and resources.

That said our reports, videos, unique campaign platform and our high calibre candidates managed to move the politics of RISE on, and it is thanks to these efforts that many continue to join on the basis that the need for socialist ideas impacting mainstream politics is a necessity not an option. We were right to use this election to work out how much radicalised energy from the referendum would translate into votes for a far left option that involved both the social movement aspect of the radical left and the SSP.

Defeats are not easy. But we have to recognise where we are, and what has been built. The beginnings of a new unity, the recruitment of hundreds of now committed activists, the development of name recognition, a strong media presence, a strong youth and woman's movement and the battle hardening that limited resources and bad election results bring.

RISE is here for the long haul, and it will undoubtedly grow now that it has a coherent and dedicated activist base. It will host a major conference of the European left in June discussing the future of the EU, it will build on areas of policy strength, it will develop its networks and intervene intellectually, it will entrench its national organisation into localities and, as it already is doing, in the trade unions. It has years now to develop and in the long run it has a bright future, especially as it has such promising and talented youth.

But true as that is, simply stating this is simplistic and in its own way tribal. If that is where this article ended, you would correctly conclude that it does not contain enough strategic thinking, and that in essence it is just the ongoing project of the far left in Scotland with a bit of boosterism to get it through a difficult period. It is not enough. We made a big turn during the referendum away from leftists clinging on to parties, defending them as the one true voice, towards raising our ideas to a mass movement that millions of people could relate to.

In truth, the forces of the radical left in Scotland now have to think in much broader terms about where we go next, and we have to be much more ambitious about what can be achieved. We have to put our forces in to a wider framework that moves us forward strategically, not just as an organisation that can recruit people and engage the public with a policy platform.

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And so, learning from the last year, we need to work out what is happening now, and how best we can advance the cause of socialism and the radical left at a time of capitalist decay and constitutional crisis.

We need an extra-parliamentary movement

The Future of the Left in Scotland

The Scottish right is emboldened by the new batch of Tory MSPs. They will be a constant source of opposition, and as a result they will be the platform for the Union. They may be able to exert pressure on a variety of questions to win concessions. But more than that, the Scottish right as well as having a strong position inside Holyrood, can also use this to rebuild ideologically in the society as a whole.

The commentators of the right, for example, are now less abstract and by definition more in touch with the weekly mechanics of parliament. This does not mean there will be a mass revival – nothing of the sort. But it does mean there is a viable outlet for right wing Scotland to pin itself too, an outlet with some clout.

More young Tories will join and become involved, sensing monetary rewards in the form of jobs and potentially as future MSPs. To them, it may start to feel less toxic. Ruth Davidson, will continue to try and detoxify the Tory brand. Some will remember Murdo Fraser's intervention in recent years calling for the wholesale rebranding of the Scottish right, dumping the Conservative tag. These things may come to pass. Whether or not a full scale transition takes place, this is a change that the broad movement for the progressive left in Scotland should take seriously.

All of this revolves around the national question. Consider Labour's manifesto. It contained many left wing policies. While their campaign appeared at times shambolic, their rhetoric was designed to appeal to their base, as a method of rebuilding. They didn't chase the centre, knowing that was already dominated by the SNP. But they just couldn't overcome the fact that their base has a different take on independence.

And so we see in broad terms two major plates implant themselves in Holyrood in a Scotland which a superficial analysis suggests has become 'ulsterised'. The SNP on the one hand, the Tories on the other, and the dividing line: Scottish nationalism versus British continuity.

But this analysis – ulsterisation – is wrong headed in the extreme. It is deployed, interestingly enough, by the unionist right, and the unionist left. Both misunderstand that questions of class and nation are bound up with not just a split on the independence question, but of left and right as an extension of it.

George Kerevan, East Lothian SNP MP, is therefore absolutely correct to come to a different conclusion:

"There is no third way in Scottish politics any longer. It is an independent, socialist and green Scotland – or a Unionist, Tory and exploited subsidiary of the City of London."

This will define the political landscape in the coming years. As a result it requires us to develop a broad movement for independence again – because that is what is going to define the balance of forces in the coming years, and in parallel the oppositional movement to the brutal austerity being unleashed by the Tories from Westminster. That movement requires radical content to mobilise the communities that injected people power into the referendum and befuddled the British State.

In addition to this overarching movement we need to agitate for wider campaigns on big issues facing the working class and the left that we can move on in the here and now. In these campaigns the left of the SNP should be involved, alongside the Greens and RISE. We will also need to turn campaigns like Better Than Zero, into real social movements to develop radical organisation that can express the millennial discontent bred by precarious work and historic wealth inequality. Alongside this we need a militant anti-austerity street movement that can exert pressure at every level of its implementation.

The next election will likely see the clash outlined by Kerevan intensify; and it may be the 'indy ref 2' election.

What will count is the political atmosphere generated in the years running up to it. The socialist left may not be in a position to break through electorally, but we can be a fighting force on the ground, and can make a massive impact in the years ahead if we apply ourselves to a strategy of building movements and developing for the future. We need to be there to keep pulling society leftwards. With the Tories now as firm opposition we have a duty to this task.

Time to think, time to build

For now, RISE will open up to discussion and debate about the way forward. That will be a lively, respectful and outward looking forum, led by members. But I hope that we will discuss more than the prospects for RISE itself, and place ourselves in a broader context, where yes we will have to face some uncomfortable truths, but where also we can re-energise for what can be an exciting period ahead. Every successful left wing organisation in history has been as a result of an organic relationship with the outside world. Moral indignation about injustice is not enough; we need strategy, aims, a record of achievement and recognition of where we have failed. That is the test of political maturity.

In the vein, as well as developing activism, we need to invest resources into rebuilding the theoretical and ideological weight of the left, which needs enriched to guide a new generation of left wing campaigners. Popular education, reading groups, ideological forums of debate and discussion, left wing political festivals – all are needed going forward.

The great thing about politics – even in moments of trouble – is that it is evolving constantly, and therefore new fronts open up all the time. What you need though, is a stable and talented group of people to travel the road with. If nothing else, I believe that we now have that under development once again on the Scottish left.

The task now is to work out how we can make that hard work effective in the struggle to come. That should start with working out not only what defines RISE, but what unites us with the movement we need to develop as outlined previously. The election has not been an easy one and there are many people, not just in RISE, who would have made a huge impact as MSPs. That will come, in time. Political representation in the parliament is important, but it is nothing without an extra parliamentary movement. Let us, for now, focus on that important and necessary work. Not only will that will shape the coming years, it will also build a longterm base for the election of socialist MSPs in the future.

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