

THE ELECTION CONUNDRUM

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THE SCOTSMAN

Let's look first at what Scotland did in the General Election of June 1983, before deciding what it might mean. At first reading, the results look pretty dismal for all of the major parties, with the exception of the Liberal-Social Democratic Party Alliance. There was the only political force which made ground north of the Border.

Their Scottish vote advanced by about 16 per cent over the share secured by the Liberals on their own in 1979. Starting from a rather lower base here than south of the Border, this was a somewhat better performance than the 12 per cent advance registered by the Alliance throughout Britain. In the smaller Scottish arena, the Alliance's 24.5 per cent share of the vote also won them a significantly larger share of seats (8 out of 72) than they gained in Britain as a whole (23 out of 633, discounting the Ulster seats).

They came within 4 per cent of the Conservatives in terms of the popular vote and, just as significant for the future perhaps, they moved into second place in 28 seats (18 against Labour and 10 against the Tories). They have replaced the Scottish National Party as the third force in Scottish politics, a position the SNP had held since 1966.

The SNP performed disastrously. They polled just under 12 per cent of the vote; retained their 2 seats (Dundee East and the Western Isles); came second in only seven constituencies and lost 53 of their 72 election deposits. Their sole comfort lies in the knowledge that they have in their time demonstrated a far greater potential for disrupting the two-party system in Scotland than has been shown this time by the Alliance who have usurped their "third force" position.

The Nationalists cannot help remembering that, at their peak in 1974, they not only polled significantly better than the Alliance, but

that they pushed themselves into a far stronger strategic position than the Alliance have now done, second in 40 Scottish seats, 35 of them against Scotland's dominant Labour party.

What happened this time was that the splintering of Scotland's solid dissenting vote between the Alliance and the SNP simply helped to preserve the two major parties' tenure of seats and this despite the fact that the Conservatives were reduced to their second lowest poll (and Labour to their lowest) since the war. For the Alliance, then, the Nationalists still represent a large road-block to advance which they do not encounter south of the Border.

The two big parties benefitted from this splintering of Scotland's "dissenting third" vote. The Conservatives finished with the same number of seats (21) that they took into the election campaign (but, after the 1982 by-election loss of Glasgow Hillhead, still one less than they had won in 1979). Labour finished with three fewer seats (41) than they had won in 1979, though Caithness and Sutherland was the only one of their seats which was lost first through the defection of its MP to the SDP and which stayed lost at the election.

This is cold comfort for both parties. They had each hoped for net gains, Labour had been predicting that they would take a maximum of 50 seats and the Tories were looking for a maximum of 26. In the event, they were both taken unawares. Labour who had nursed the fear of a much greater Nationalist upsurge than happened, were still wounded by large abstentions, and the Conservatives genuinely did not expect the Alliance to perform so well in Scotland.

The Conservatives console themselves with the fact that in Scotland they achieved a 1.7 per cent swing against Labour and narrowed Labour's lead over them in terms of votes cast from 10.1 per cent in 1979 to 6.7 per cent in June. But what is the meaning of this statistical accomplishment? The Tory vote fell in Scotland as it did in the rest of Britain. All that happened was that Labour's vote fell by twice as much.

In reality the election result did not increase Labour's vulnerability to the Tories, of the 22 seats in which the

Conservatives finished up as challengers to Labour, only 4 (Cathcart, Clydesdale, Dumbarton and Dunfermline West) are held on genuinely marginal majorities of less than 5,000 votes.

What the election did do was intensify the continuing anti-Tory character of Scottish politics. Where 69 per cent of the Scottish voters rejected the Conservatives in 1979, 72 per cent did so in June. Moreover, the result again emphasised the exposure of the Scottish Conservatives to attack by third party tactical voting. They now hold seven seats with majorities of less than 5,000 votes over the Alliance (Edinburgh South, West and Pentlands, Renfrew West, Strathkelvin, North-east Fife and Argyll). And they are in the same tight relationship with the Scottish National Party in another three (Angus East, Banff and Buchan, and in Moray). Labour, by contrast, face the tactical threat in only four constituencies (East Kilbride, Greenock, Livingston and Leith).

Labour remain the principal means by which Scottish voters continue to express their opposition to the Conservatives. However, the party's traditional claim on Scottish electoral loyalty is clearly no longer as automatic as it used to be. In fact, this was Labour's worst performance north of the Border on post-war record. They may have lost less ground than their colleagues south of the Border, but their share of the poll at 35 per cent was still lower than the previous trough in October 1974 when they were being hammered on the Nationalist anvil.

As for the SNP themselves, what they had gained on the tactical-voting swings in the Seventies, they promptly lost on the tactical-voting roundabouts in the Eighties. Voters turned to them as the most viable recipient of the 'protest' vote in only seven constituencies. There were four times as many seats in which the Alliance was preferred as the expression of a plague on Tory and Labour houses.

Where the tactical vote was split between the SNP and the Alliance, both minorities suffered for it. In nine seats (Perth and Kinross, Argyll and Bute, Edinburgh West, Angus East, Moray, Banff and Buchan, Renfrew West and Inverclyde, North-east Fife, Strathkelvin and Bearsden) it is at least arguable that if one or the other of the two minorities had left a clear field, then the present incumbent could

have been dispossessed. But the likelihood of that degree of self-sacrificial co-operation by either the SNP or the Alliance looks vanishingly small.

Where does all this leave Scottish politics? Its face is still distinctive enough to recognise that a different political system is at work north of the Border; but the individual features, on which voters focussed so sharply ten and fifteen years ago, have become blurred. A "Scottish dimension" persists in domestic politics, certainly, but British impulses have re-asserted their dominance.

One sees this most clearly in the way the political struggle between the Scottish National Party and the Liberal-SDP Alliance resolved itself. In the Seventies, the SNP were remarkably successful in creating and capitalising upon the primacy of Scottish sentiment in politics; the devolution issue was seen almost wholly as a Scottish question and was couched almost exclusively in terms of the proposal to create an elected Scottish Assembly. The fact that it had considerable British implications seemed of secondary importance. The development of North Sea oil, again, was articulated as an argument about "Scottish oil", even when the debate in reality was concerned with the more complex issue of Scotland's share of a British fiscal resource. And this pressure was coming, remember, from a Scottish National Party which saw itself - indeed it used the very description - as Scotland's "social democratic" party. Ten years before the launch of Britain's Social Democratic Party, in other words, the Nationalists were consciously posing as the Scottish forerunner, inviting support from those frustrated voters who sensed that a start could be made in Scotland at breaking the two-party system.

This Scottish dimension began to collapse with the 1979 Referendum. And it has proved almost impossible to sustain into Mrs Thatcher's post-Falklands imperial Britain. The SNP assumed that it would be enough to dismiss the SDP in particular and the Alliance by implication as "just an English party". They were wrong. The fact is that thousands of Scots who had been prepared in the mid-Seventies to gamble with the Nationalists as they marched towards constitutional upheaval, decided in the fearful mid-Eighties to prefer a British Alliance which quite specifically offered no such risk at all.

Indeed, the surprising strength of the Alliance in Scotland derived precisely from the popular perception of it as a British movement. In the run-up to the election, for example, it had the capacity to pose at least as an alternative parliamentary opposition, even if its claim to be an alternative government looked more hollow as the campaign wore on. The SNP has never been able to luxuriate in that kind of credibility, except by pre-supposing the constitutional leap-in-the-dark of independence. But the Scots have been up to that precipice and shrank back from the edge in the mid-seventies. This time, if constitutional reform was still a popular motive for party choice in Scotland (as it was), then there were good reasons for siding with the Alliance exactly because of the balanced nature of their proposals for regional parliaments throughout Britain.

Ironically, that does not mean in my view that the Alliance advance in Scotland has any greater guarantee of permanence than did the advance of the SNP ten years ago. Undoubtedly they benefitted in Scotland from their British media-hype: they proved to the horror of the Nationalists and the discomfort of Labour that the Alliance tide could wash across the Border, when almost every opinion poll up to polling day itself had suggested a significantly lower level of support in Scotland than south of the Border.

They demonstrated that Labour could not insulate themselves in Scotland from movements of opinion which were leading to the collapse of their party in England. On the other hand, it is impossible to escape the impression of the Alliance (and the SDP part of it in particular) as an insubstantial political force in many parts of Scotland. They gained support out of all proportion to their organisational strength on the ground. In a whole host of constituencies they ran no more than paper campaigns; their vote is spread thinly across much of Scotland's political landscape. It is quite capable of evaporating on a hot day.

Moreover, the Alliance were undoubtedly assisted by the image of the Scottish National Party as a party at war with itself. The divisions in the SNP may have had much more to do with personalities than with policies and strategies. Nonetheless, the vituperative argument, culminating in the messy expulsion and later re-admission of

the leaders of the Left-wing "79 Group" must have damaged them on the doorsteps and on the shop floors of Labour-voting Scotland.

However, those divisions may not endure. Some of the principal protagonists have now taken themselves off into hiding or into exile. And on the key issues of devolutionary steps towards independence, of Common Market membership and of participation in NATO, the post-election SNP has at least begun to give the impression of greater unity. They cannot be written-off. Indeed, you could argue that their potential to come back centre-stage is still quite considerable, if they are capable of exploiting the single political issue which continues to tantalise them in this Parliament just as it eluded them in the last.

The issue I have in mind is the one now commonly referred to in journalistic shorthand as "the question of Scotland's political mandate". The fact is that Labour's two successive defeats by the Tories (not to mention the possibility of a hat-trick in 1987-88) have placed Labour in Scotland in a potentially vulnerable position. North of the Border, the Conservatives now enjoy less popular support for the policies they are pursuing than any administration in St. Andrew's House has enjoyed since the war.

Yet the result merely underlines Labour's impotence, as Scotland's dominant party in the face of the continuing Tory "minority" administration, whose Scottish manifesto, if manifestos are to mean anything, was decisively rejected by the Scottish voters. In that sense, the election has again aroused the debate about the popular legitimacy of Conservative rule, not least on those domestic Scottish issues which are handled through devolved Scottish Office machinery and which are initiated in the Commons through separate legislative procedures.

One should not exaggerate the issue, that is true. It is a debate which has been driven underground in Scotland. Devolution itself was never a conscious issue at the polls. Nonetheless, it continues to have importance as a form of political Morse, a means of signalling to the electorate a party's concern about the plight of a Scotland which has the administrative and legislative machinery but lacks only the political machinery for responding to the popular will on the very

issues which moved voters most, housing, education, industrial development, health-care, the conduct of local government, farming and fishing.

Labour have recognised the subterranean importance of the issue. Since the election they have re-emphasised their commitment to the establishment of a Scottish Assembly and have undertaken to promote another Devolution Bill in this Parliament. (James Naughtie's chapter deals in excellent detail with emerging tactics in Parliament). But Labour are bound to be ambivalent about carrying their commitment into a head-on dispute about the Tories' right to rule in Scotland. That is much too dangerous.

No British party seeking power in the British Parliament could afford to let the desire for regional devolution undermine the sovereignty of the Commons. The same applies to the Alliance. But the SNP suffer from no such inhibitions. They can profit from the spectacle of a frustrated Labour party, promoting itself as the political means for protecting Scotland from Thatcherism, yet without the institutional means for making that protection effective.

Moreover, this Scottish concern for Labour is not one-dimensional. It has an English side to it as well. For the moment, Labour may well feel that they can afford to rest on their Scottish laurels, content in the knowledge that, in the worst UK election for their party since 1918, they did at least keep sufficient of their vote together in Scotland to retain their dominance in the constituency count.

But that dominance in Scotland is founded not just on habit, or voting reflexes conditioned by an unthinking loyalty. People vote for Labour in Scotland because they want Labour to govern. If the penny were to drop in Scotland that the party in England was incapable of reasserting itself as a vehicle of power, (and that perception was beginning to gain dangerous ground towards the end of the election campaign), then an awful lot of psychological brakes would be released.

In that situation many thousands of voters would feel free to examine alternatives to Labour more keenly than they have done before.

Conversely, Labour in Scotland would itself be forced to move in order simply to retain its traditional power base. And the only direction it can move is down the separatist path, by distancing itself in organisational and political terms from its English disaster area. The adjustment would undoubtedly be painful. It could not be accomplished without casualties. But the fact remains, that if Labour cannot rebuild in England in a way which makes them look like an alternative government at Westminster, then Labour in Scotland will be sorely tempted to begin looking for alternative means of exercising their political power here in Scotland.

The only questions then will be the age-old ones: will the Nationalists be in a position to bid for power by disinheriting Labour? Or will Labour retain power in Scotland by stealing the nationalist mantle?