

## THE 1984 EUROPEAN ELECTION IN SCOTLAND

**JOHN BOCHEL**  
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
UNIVERSITY OF DUNDEE

**DAVID DENVER**  
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICS  
UNIVERSITY OF LANCASTER

The second election for the European Parliament was held in June 1984, just one month after the District elections in Scotland and a year after a Westminster election in 1983. It is probably fair to say that the main popular and media interest concentrated on the fortunes of the parties rather than on the substantive issues, and that is also the limited concern of this paper.

The principle interest was whether the recovery in Labour's fortunes since 1983 and the decline in Conservative, Alliance and SNP support suggested by opinion polls, and confirmed by the District elections, would continue. But first it is worth comparing the result of the second European election with the first held in 1979. Table 1 compares party performances at the two European elections. In 1984 Labour made substantial progress, the Conservatives lost a lot of ground and the SNP suffered, on this calculation, a small setback. Perhaps the most striking is the poor performance of the Alliance, up only 1.7 percentage points over the Liberal only performance in 1979.

The first European election is widely regarded as somewhat freakish and may not form a good basis for comparison. It took place soon after a considerable Conservative victory in a Westminster election, and at a time of serious demoralisation for Labour and the SNP. Divided as it was on the whole European issue, Labour failed to take the election seriously and as a

TABLE 1

### Party Shares of the Vote: European Elections 1979 and 1984

	1979	1984	Change 1979-1984
	%	%	%
Conservative	33.7	25.7	-8.0
Labour	33.0	40.7	+7.7
Liberal/Alliance	13.9	15.6	+1.7
SNP	19.4	17.8	-1.6

consequence it suffered, doing considerably worse than at the General election. In contrast, the 1984 election was held under a new Labour leadership determined to use the occasion as a test of the popularity of the Conservative government.

It is perhaps more useful to compare the results of the 1984 European election with the Westminster election of 1983 (Table 2). Again Labour

TABLE 2

### Party Shares of the Vote: 1983 General Election and 1984 European Election

	1983 General Election	1984 European Election	Change 1983-1984
	%	%	%
Conservative	28.4	25.7	-2.7
Labour	35.1	40.7	+5.6
Liberal/Alliance	24.5	15.6	-8.9
SNP	11.8	17.8	+6.0

made substantial progress between the two elections and the Conservative vote declined slightly from an already low level. Two surprises are reflected in the Table – the abrupt decline, by almost 9 percentage points, in the Alliance share of the votes, and the significant increase of 6 percentage points in the SNP share. The firmness of these trends can be tested by a comparison of the European elections results with those in the 1984 District elections held a month earlier. The calculations in Table 3 for the District

TABLE 3

Party Shares of the Vote: District Elections and European Election 1984

	District Elections (Four-Party Contest) %	European Election %	Change %
Conservative	25.8	25.7	-0.1
Labour	45.9	40.7	-5.2
Alliance	17.5	15.6	-1.9
SNP	10.8	17.8	+7.0

election are based only on those wards which were fought by the four main parties. (Those wishing to make comparisons with the total shares of the vote will find the necessary data in our paper on the District elections). The major feature of Table 3 is confirmation of a continuing disappointing performance for the Alliance. The striking increase in the SNP share is more puzzling. It is difficult to believe that the party devoted more resources to the European than to the District elections, but the groundwork laid a month earlier may have paid off (although the same might be said of the Alliance). It seems unlikely that opinion shifted substantially in one month during which there were no new major domestic issues in view.

In the 1979 European election the Conservatives won five of the eight European seats in Scotland, Labour won only two and the SNP one. In 1984 the position was reversed for Labour and the Conservatives who won five and two respectively, the SNP retained its one seat. Labour now holds Glasgow, Lothians, Mid Scotland and Fife, Strathclyde East and Strathclyde West. The Conservatives hold Scotland North East and Scotland South.

It is not possible to talk about gains and losses because of extensive boundary changes, but the 1983 Westminster results can be aggregated to estimate the pre-election status of the European seats (Table 4). Given these, there was no real surprises in individual constituency results, with perhaps, the exception of the Highlands and Islands. As Table 4 shows this was a seat in which the Alliance had a lead over the Conservatives. (In the General election the SNP obtained only 21.7 per cent of the aggregate vote in the seven constituencies comprising the European seat. Alliance candidates had also won four of the seven Westminster seats). Despite the

TABLE 4

Pre-election Status of European Seats Based on 1983 General Election Results

	%
Glasgow	32.1 Labour lead over Alliance
Lothians	4.2 Labour lead over Conservatives
Mid Scotland and Fife	6.1 Labour lead over Conservatives
Strathclyde East	28.6 Labour lead over Alliance
Strathclyde West	6.3 Labour lead over Conservatives
Scotland North East	12.7 Conservative lead over Labour
Scotland South	3.6 Conservative lead over Labour
Highlands and Islands	3.0 Alliance lead over Conservative

statistical evidence it was generally considered that the battle here would be between the Alliance candidate (Russell Johnston, Liberal MP for Inverness, Nairn and Lochaber) and the SNP candidate (Winnie Ewing, the incumbent European MP). Those who watched the results programme on BBCTV will recall that the computer, stubbornly, throughout the night, predicted an Alliance victory. The computer could not take account of the advantages of incumbency for a publicity conscious MP, or the possible resentment by the electorate at Johnston's readiness to relinquish a Westminster seat to which he had been elected only a year before, or of the charisma and campaigning skills of Winnie Ewing. In the event she won a stunning victory.

Elsewhere the results reflected the standing of the parties in the polls and the estimates based on the 1983 General election. Labour professed disappointment at not winning Scotland South, but it would have been a major upset if they had done so. As it is this is now a highly marginal seat (1.9 per cent Conservative lead over Labour). There were fears in the Labour camp that low turnout would adversely affect them, but this seems to have been far from the case. In every constituency Labour did better than in 1983. The Alliance did not win a seat and indeed slipped badly in every one of the eight constituencies. On estimated status they had one first place, two second places and five third places. In the election they ended up with one second place, three third and four fourth places. The promise of 1983 had quickly evaporated. The SNP lost two deposits and the Alliance one in Scotland.

Turnout remains a problem for those who value the European elections as an affirmation of commitment to Europe. In 1979 Scotland had, with 36.6 per cent, a slightly higher turnout than the United Kingdom

as a whole (32.7 per cent), but in 1984 the differential had virtually disappeared. The 32.7 per cent turnout in Scotland was considerably lower than for the District elections (44.4 per cent). North East Scotland, which contains the Grampian Region, had, predictably, the lowest turnout (28.7 per cent) and the Highlands and Islands the highest (38.4 per cent).

The 1984 European election, then, confirmed Labour's dominance in Scotland and the continuing weakness and diminishing appeal of the Alliance. The SNP made more progress than any other party, but the basis of that progress and its soundness as a predictor for the future are difficult to estimate. Labour is clearly in a much stronger position in Scotland (with 40.7 per cent of the votes) than in Britain as a whole (36.5 per cent of the votes) and the Conservatives are very much weaker in Scotland (25.7 per cent of the votes in Scotland compared with 40.8 per cent in Britain as a whole). The Alliance too, on the basis of the election results, has obviously more appeal South of the Border than in Scotland. The implications for British politics are intriguing.