

British Politics and Policy

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4/14/2015

Throughout the short campaign, this blog will be publishing a series of posts that focus on each of the electoral regions in the UK. In this post, [Nicola McEwen](#) discusses the key things to look out for in Scotland.



Whereas Scottish Parliamentary elections give a platform to Scotland-centred issues, Westminster General Elections in Scotland are usually very British affairs. Especially since devolution in 1999, UK elections have been dominated by the contest for Prime Minister and the party of British government. Not so this time, however much the Labour Party would like it to be.

Opinion polls since before Christmas have suggested [the SNP will make considerable gains in May](#). The latest poll of polls puts the SNP on 45% – some 25 percentage points above its 2010 result (What Scotland Thinks, 6 April 2015). If this were the result on 7 May, it could see the party win a staggering 47 of Scotland's 59 seats. The Labour Party is on 28% with a projected seat share of just 10 seats, compared to the 41 seats it won in 2010. That is not a prediction. The short campaign has barely begun; there are still three weeks to go until polling day. That's a long time in politics. But it is difficult to foresee the circumstances under which a significant gap between the SNP and Labour would close. As one ex Labour MP and candidate reportedly said, the SNP surge as "like a tsunami". Another said "I'm now set to Defcon f****d.... It doesn't matter how good you are or how weak your (SNP) opponent; it's over" (the Herald, 6 April).

These polls – and the sentiments – point to a [potential sea-change in Scottish politics](#). The Labour Party has won the largest share of the vote in Scotland and a majority of Westminster Scottish seats since 1955. Its performance in 2010 was a high point, when the party won almost 70% of Scottish seats on a 41% vote share. But there are a number of pointers that help to explain the decline in support for Labour since 2010 and the corresponding rise in support for the SNP.

First, the Labour Party has itself changed. Gone are the generation of Scottish Labour MPs who were dominant figures within UK Labour for two decades, including during its transition from 'old' to 'new' Labour. Most notable among those was Gordon Brown. Whereas Brown remained a towering figure in Scotland in the 2010 election long after his stature had diminished south of the border, his successor Ed Miliband has little connection with Scotland and struggles to have resonance among Scottish voters.

Second, Labour has been gradually losing its dominance of Scottish constituency representation in recent Scottish Parliament elections. In the first devolution elections of 1999, Labour secured 53 of the 73 Scottish Parliament constituency seats (with the SNP picking up most of its seats from the regional lists). By 2011, Labour won just 11 seats by this route. The SNP by contrast has strengthened its hold in these constituencies, building its strength from the 7 constituency seats it secured in 1999 to the 53 it won in 2011. Thus the SNP has already made inroads as local representatives in what, in Westminster terms, have hitherto been seen as Labour heartlands.

Last year's independence referendum is also crucial to understanding Labour's current predicament and the [SNP's opportunity](#). The referendum was never just about who won and who lost. So long as the Yes vote cleared 40%, there was always the opportunity that the referendum would produce two winners, and that it would mark progress rather than setback for the independence cause.

But [few predicted the speed with which the SNP would capitalise](#) on that progress. In spite of its eight years in office, the SNP seems refreshed, aided by the popularity of its new leader. Already by some margin the largest party in Scotland before the referendum with just over 25,000 members, the SNP has seen its membership surge, reaching

over 100,000 members by the end of March. That's a formidable army of volunteers to mobilise in an election campaign.

The SNP has also captured the support of many of the 45% who voted Yes last September – according to a recent Panelbase survey for the Sunday Times, 80% of yes voters now back the SNP. But while there is a strong correlation between SNP support and support for independence, the SNP appears to have made inroads into Labour's traditional ideological ground. The same Panelbase poll found that 55% of respondents felt that the SNP were "strongly in favour" of a more equal society, compared with just 14% who felt the same about Labour. The latter includes just over a third who intend to vote Labour in May.

If an electoral tsunami does sweep a large number of SNP MPs to Westminster, the impact should not be underestimated, especially in the context of a government that will likely have a precarious majority, if it has a majority at all. The SNP would have an emboldened group of MPs making their presence felt within the Commons chamber and committees. Though she will not be among them, such a result would also reaffirm the authority of Nicola Sturgeon, potentially strengthening her position when negotiating with the UK government in the intergovernmental arena.

On the other hand, heightened influence at Westminster could also pose longer-term challenges for the SNP's territorial goals. One of the features of the SNP's electoral success in 2007 and 2011 was that it coincided with heightened satisfaction with the Union and Scotland's place within it. In particular, as Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys indicate, since 2007, a majority now believe that having a Scottish Parliament gives Scotland a stronger voice in the UK. If Scotland's voice is more audible still with a large intake of SNP MPs at Westminster, there is a chance it may diminish the rationale for radical self-government within Scotland.

About the Authors

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