DISUNITED KINGDOM – the elections on 6 May

by Terry Conway 31 May 2021

On 6 May 2021 there were elections of some sort everywhere in England, in Scotland and in Wales. The picture in England was one in which Johnson's Tories using a model of right-populist Keynesianism and appeals to English nationalism and anti-migrant racism, have done well and Starmer's Labour had disastrous results. The Green Party of England and Wales also improved their showing – gaining 80 extra seats in local government.

There were parts of England where Labour did better – notably in Greater Manchester where Mayor Andy Burnham had showed rather more spine in challenging the Tories than Labour leader Keir Starmer, but also in parts of the south east. Indeed, Labour did relatively well at the level of Mayors – winning 11 out of the 13 contests – including Sadiq Khan's seat in London, but this is nothing like enough to compensate for the loss of a bye-election in Hartlepool and dire results at local council level.

But it is the extraordinary differences between Scotland, Wales and England that are the key story of this election and that the left in England ignores at its peril.

Pro-independence majority at Holyrood

Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP (Scottish National Party) are right to point out that it is a huge victory to be returned as the largest party after 14 years in office, to be forming the fourth government in succession This is particularly the case if you realise that the particular

form of proportional representation voting in use for Holyrood elections was precisely introduced to prevent any party getting an absolute majority. They would have needed 65 seats to take an absolute majority and came one short with 64 – but that is one more than in 2016.

They did so with a much higher turnout than anywhere else in Britain, 64 per cent overall with some constituencies topping 70 per cent and queues reported in some places. One polling station was unable to close until 11.30pm because of the numbers already queuing before the 10pm deadline.

Another first for Scotland was that for the first time there – or anywhere else in Britain – all foreign nationals and anyone serving a prison sentence of less than 12 months to vote. [1] And 16-17 year olds – allowed to vote in Wales for the first time at this election – have been allowed to vote in Scottish elections since 2015. England looks increasingly isolated with its limited franchise.

Despite the split in the independence electoral camp as a result of the founding of Alba by former first Minister Alec Salmond, and the fact that the Unionist media used this as an opportunity to lay into both Nicola Sturgeon personally and her party, the SNP vote has held up and it remains the main electoral expression of the independence movement.

While Salmond attempted to present Alba as to the left of the SNP, even on the question of independence; they do not have the key to unlock the standoff between Westminster and Holyrood. Only a mass movement on the schemes (housing estates) and the streets which dwarfs what the Radical Independence campaign impressively managed in the second referendum, based on a radical vision of what an independent Scotland would stand for, could force Johnson to change his mind.

This needs to be combined with a major growth in support in

England and Wales for the democratic right of the Scottish people to decide. Salmond and Alba are no more likely to build such a pluralist movement than Sturgeon and the SNP. In the meantime, Alba has a reactionary stance on social issues with prominent members playing a role in an anti trans backlash and trivialising misogyny in terms of Salmond's behaviour.

The Scottish Greens, who stood in more constituencies than previously and saw their share of the vote rise, have also elected eight MSPs, an improvement on their previous best showing in 2003 where they elected 7. Indeed, they could easily have elected 10 MSPs – coming only a few hundred votes short of doing so.

Support for independence was clearer in their manifesto than before and with COP26 coming to Glasgow in November the environment has been climbing the Scottish political agenda. So it was not surprising that that section of the pro-independence electorate who did not buy the rather hollow appeal to give both their votes to the SNP were more likely to back the Greens. [2] Their strong showing should be welcomed and it is to be expected they will exact a radical price from the SNP – particularly, but not necessarily exclusively on environmental questions.

The Scottish Greens are an interesting formation – with political positions similar to or to the left of the GPEW (Green Party of England and Wales) – but with no real branch structure or existence outside elections. Patrick Harvie has been the party's dominant figure for a long time – becoming an MSP in 2003 and taking over from Robin Harper in 2008 as co-convenor (the post became co-leader in 2019). Though he has nominally shared the leadership during these years the fact that 5 women have shared that role with him means that his profile has been much greater. Whether a bigger parliamentary group, including previous co-convenor and socialist Maggie Chapman, who was also active in the Radical Independence Campaign, remains to be seen.

While there is not the scope in this piece to deal with the radical left in Scotland in detail, its certainly worth noting that this was the first Holyrood elections were there were no pro-independence candidates to the left of the Greens. The Scottish Socialist Party decided not to stand any candidates – and indeed looking at their website, they hardly acknowledge an election was taking place. Sheridan's Solidarity has effectively disappeared.

The current that played a major role in the Radical Independence Campaign during the previous referendum campaign, the International Socialist group Scotland, formally dissolved in 2015 with its members going into other projects such as Rise and Conter. Unfortunately some of them were also heavily involved in attempts to undemocratically wind up RIC precisely at the point when the left needed to really focus on what urgent tasks would be posed for it following the inevitable fact of a new electoral mandate for a new referendum. [3] After all it was precisely in the last referendum campaign that the failure of the SNP to put forward a radical vision for Scotland became apparent to the greatest numbers. The Republican Socialist Platform has made some important steps forward in this regard but cannot hope to entirely fill the gap

Unionist discipline

There was disciplined tactical voting in the Unionist camp. In seat after seat significant numbers of voters backed whichever Unionist party was seen as the strongest challenger to the SNP, whether that be Tory, Labour or Lib Dem, though this was less true of Labour voters. While this did not take seats from the governing party, it did prevent the SNP taking a number of key target seats – Dumbarton was held by Labour as was Edinburgh Southern while the Tories held Eastwood.

In Dumbarton, the seat with the smallest majority in the country, Labour's Jackie Baillie saw an increase of 6.1 per

cent in her votes with the Tory vote falling by 6.3 per cent and the Lib Dems by 1.6. In Edinburgh Southern Labour's vote increased 10.4 per cent, the Tory vote fell 14.5 per cent and the SNP vote rose only 4.4 per cent. In Eastwood the Tory vote went up by 6.2 per cent to hold the seat while the SNP challenging increased only by 5.6, while Labour's vote plummeted by 14.8 in a seat where they had no hope of even being second. It is probably worth marking the fact that a higher proportion of Tory supporters switched to Labour where this was tactically advisable – the strength of their unionism was hugely apparent.

The new leader of Scottish Labour, Anas Sarwar, presided over a 1.6 fall in his party's vote, the worst since devolution, but claims it is on 'a journey back'. Tell that to the whole of the Glasgow Kelvin Executive committee who resigned their positions after candidate Hollie Cameron was removed for disagreeing with the leadership over the right to a referendum. [4] The support even for the right to a referendum has always been weak in Scottish Labour, which has a long tradition of tribalism and of dismissing the SNP as Tartan Tories – somewhat ironically when the majority of their leadership is happy to block with the Conservative and Unionist Party to try to defeat a push for independence.

While promises of further devolution may have purchase in Wales and in the English cities, it is unclear that they would fly in Scotland. Sarwar is much closer to Starmer than to Drakeford and has inherited a Scottish Labour Party which has lost a huge proportion of its working-class base in particular to the SNP. No road back without some very sharp turns – turns which Sarwar is certainly not contemplating.

The Welsh dragon roars

Welsh Labour's Mark Drakeford will be very pleased with the surprisingly good results in the Sennedd elections where Labour took 30 seats, Tories 16, Plaid 13 and Lib Dems 1.

Making a comparison with the previous national elections in Wales is complex because then UKIP took 7 seats and this time they (nor the new formation Abolish the Welsh Assembly with similar reactionary roots) had any significant impact. This, together with the two tier electoral system means that calculating swings is a nightmare.

Labour's showing was much better than opinion polls predicted early on. Drakeford has definitely benefited from managing the pandemic relatively well – he has not made nearly as many U-turns as Johnson, though that does not explain the shift during the campaign. [5] Labour will work with other parties on a case by case basis; the widely predicted Labour-Plaid coalition is not a runner. And while the Tories in Wales are much less pleased than those in England, they should not be completely written off.

The big political story in Wales however is increasing support for independence . [6] Before 2018, the proportion of Welsh voters in favour of independence ranged between 10% and 20%. However, this figure has increased in recent years. Recent polling indicates that between one quarter and one third of Welsh voters who express a view say they would vote Yes in a Welsh independence referendum. Yes Cymru has grown significantly – and those numbers are probably much higher amongst younger people.

But unlike in Scotland, where for the mass of people the SNP is clearly the electoral voice of the independence movement, the same is not true in the same way for Plaid in Wales. While the differences are indisputable the reasons need more exploration.

There are certainly different takes. This piece "This was a bad election for Plaid Cymru – but they seem to be winning without winning elections" seems a profoundly complacent piece after such a lacklustre campaign by Plaid, whereas this [Voice Wales article which suggests former Plaid leader Leanne Wood,

who lost her seat in the Rhonda, might have been a victim of current leader Adam Price failure to champion independence enough in a lacklustre campaign. [7]

Plaid's website remarkably has no reaction to the results – only a statement at the eve of poll as to why people should vote for Plaid. I can only find Price's comment on his own individual election result – but clearly they will not be happy not only at the loss of Leanne Wood's seat but with their national showing. [8]

Indeed independence was the issue that everyone other than the far right were trying to downplay despite its increasing popularity. The Welsh Labour manifesto has nothing to say about it but Drakeford made a speech to Welsh Labour's spring conference in late February in which he said: "Now, for all that to be achieved we need a more powerful devolution settlement. One in which we secure both home rule for Wales but in a successful United Kingdom. Internationalist, not nationalist. Outward facing, not inward looking." [9]

The fact that since the election Mick Antoniw has been appointed to a new post of Minster for the Constitution shows that this was not just a stance to undermine Plaid at the election but a longer term route that Welsh Labour under Drakeford is committed to going down. Antoniw was one of the those involved in the publication of an extensive report on Radical Federalism published this January – so in appointing him Drakeford is certainly given some weight to his views. [10]

While sections of the Welsh Labour bureaucracy can be as tribalist as is the case for the overwhelming majority of Scottish Labour, there is also more support – and more organised support for independence inside Welsh Labour than there ever was in their sister party in Scotland. Labour for an independent Wales is a visible and serious organisation which makes this key statement: Labour for an Independent

Wales sees independence as a tool with which to organise a socialist state, on an equal footing with every other state around the world – an ambition that is unattainable in the United Kingdom as it is.

It is not clear how these views around home rule and independence are reflected within the Labour left in Wales. Welsh Labour Grassroots, the sister organisation of Momentum in Wales, these days has a very out of date website and no list of its current office holders, but it was good to see prominent Welsh Labour Grassroots member s making a public tribute to Leanne Wood. This sentiment was also expressed widely by supporters of Labour for an Independent Wales recognising that she was probably the most left wing members of the Sennedd

All of this means that for socialists in England the question of deepening our understanding of the national questions in both Scotland and Wales, and in particular fighting for labour movement support for the right to self determination, needs to be pushed much higher up our political agenda.

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