

Entering an Age of Coalitions

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The elections on 3 May 2007 will be a watershed in Scottish politics. Leaving the Scottish Parliament election to one-side, it will be at local authority level that a political shift will be seen on an unprecedented level. One of the primary reasons for this is that the next local government elections will use the 'Single Transferable Vote' (STV) system instead of the 'First Past the Post' (FPTP) system that has been used to date.

Under the old system we had relatively small wards and each of those wards had just a single councillor. At the elections you voted for just one candidate by marking an 'x' in the appropriate box. From May the new system has wards that will elect either three or four councillors, and the wards are three to four times the size of the old wards to take account of this. When voting you rank the candidates in order of preference. This Single Transferable Vote system is a 'proportional representation' (PR) system that should lead to the make-up of any given council mirroring a clearer representation of how the people voted.

Having a proportional representation system for elections will not only produce a 'fairer' result but it will go a long way to smash party fiefdoms across the country. I was for many years both a member and a councillor for the Labour Party and witnessed first hand how these fiefdoms operated elsewhere in the country and also closer to home here in Edinburgh. The most standard operation of these fiefdoms within the Labour Party was for the sitting or aspirant councillor to load the local branch with family members to take over the running of the Party locally. This created a problem for the internal democracy of the Labour Party in many parts of the country. Any new or distrusted members would quickly be cut out of meetings and decision-making. 'Outsiders' were often simply not informed when meetings to select candidates and such were taking place. This often had the affect of driving away members

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and activists who were ostracised by those in control of the fiefdom. This driving away of ordinary members and activists from the Labour Party coupled with the wards already being solid for the Party meant that outside of a few weeks before election day the Labour Party simply didn't campaign as they felt they didn't have to. And there was no one on the ground to do it for them anyway.

But with new Single Transferable Vote wards being up to four times the size of the old ones there is no such thing as a ward being 'solid' for any one party. This has meant that neighbouring branches of the Labour Party, which may have had little to do with each other in the past, have been flung together to try and agree on their local candidates. This simple act of opening up the range of people who select the candidates has been enough to panic some of those who have enjoyed complete control of their local branch to literally take the money and run. For the forthcoming election this leaves Labour in something of a quandary. They witness their old fiefdoms being smashed by proportional representation and also have to wake up to the fact that they simply do not have the same number of bodies on the ground as the other parties. In truth there are large sections of Scotland where the Labour Party simply doesn't know how to carry out an election campaign. They have existed for too long in an effective oligarchy and it has left the party sluggish and unable to meet effectively the changes that come with Single Transferable Vote.

From my experience when it comes to pounding the streets the Lib Dems, Greens and my own party, the Scottish National Party (SNP), are far more adept and prepared for these elections than the Labour Party – despite the fact that it controls the majority of councils in Scotland. In an effort to break up the fiefdoms under the old voting system the SNP has honed its campaigning and organisation to win at local government level. In the last few years the SNP winning council by-elections in former Labour strongholds has become a regular occurrence. By way of example in the recent Markinch and Woodside by-election in Fife the SNP's John Beare won with a swing to the SNP from Labour of around 30 per cent. We campaigned hard and listened to the people and Labour simply had no one on the ground.

Being in control of most councils Labour also have the largest number of councillors in the country by some way. This has served not only to keep Labour representatives in visible positions of power, it has also provided the Labour Party with a steady revenue stream. Not just from councillors putting their hand in their pocket from their council wages but also from Labour groups directing that a portion of the allowances from those in official positions be diverted to the Party. I have previously held a number of positions on Edinburgh Council as part of the Labour administration and this was the Party's practice at that time and still is to this day. The SNP, unlike Labour, does not direct funds from these special allowances to the Party. Labour has depended on their councillors not just as the base for their campaigning organisation but also for finance; but with a dramatic reduction in the number of Labour councillors expected to be returning, that level of finance and organisation is going to be hit hard.

It seems that there will be no corner of the country where there won't be a dramatic downturn in the number of Labour councillors. In Glasgow, where many had predicted it would be one of the few areas that they managed to hold on, there have been press reports of Labour trying to court the Lib Dems to form a coalition after the election as they fear they won't have a majority. Labour's fear of a collapse in their number of councillors, if not support, can be seen here in the Capital too. There is a pensive air of anticipation about Edinburgh City Chambers these days. There are some here who are seeking to move onwards to the Scottish Parliament and more still who are choosing to walk away or who have been deselected. On Edinburgh Council Labour currently has 30 councillors to 28 opposition members, the slimmest of majorities.

The culture of the Labour Party's oligarchy does not stop with the individual fiefdoms of some councillors but also extends to the leadership of the Labour groups. Individual councillors who may wish to express a dissenting view are seized upon and are forced into line by being told that any vote against the leadership's line on any issue will be construed as a vote against the leadership itself. The Labour leadership in Edinburgh, and in other parts of the country, has been quick to spot the opportunity that a loss in their numbers actually presents them. At the election in May Labour will be standing just 24 candidates here in the Capital, down six from the number of councillors they currently hold. Before a vote is even cast Labour's council numbers in Edinburgh will be reduced by a fifth. It is no coincidence that among the six sitting Labour councillors that have been deselected are those who have very occasionally voted against the leadership line and also just so happened to have voted against the current Labour group leader in recent elections. The problems that the Single Transferable Vote presents for Labour have of course been greeted as an opportunity by the other parties. Within the SNP the new system has been welcomed and is being campaigned on with gusto. There have been many areas of the country where the SNP has a sizeable vote but, due to the outgoing electoral system, have few councillors elected. The situation here in Edinburgh for the SNP is a case in point. Despite receiving around 16 per cent of the popular vote in the 2003 council elections the SNP had no councillors elected – a situation I rectified over a year ago.

In terms of organisation on the ground the move to Single Transferable Vote does pose some challenges. The larger wards in themselves are not the major problem as all of the area would have had to have been covered anyway. The real organisational problem is that the local elections and the Scottish Parliament elections are on the same day and the new wards and the parliamentary constituencies are not coterminous. There have been some who have complained that this lack of coterminous boundaries means that people won't be sure who their representative is. In truth the biggest problem that a party can really have is that they have to spend more time preparing leaflet-runs than they have in the past to ensure that the right material goes out in the right areas. I also think that we may begin to witness an attitudinal shift in how the parties interact with each other. In the past the first past the post system created a culture of 'winner takes all' and

bitterness between parties that could border on the sectarian. Single Transferable Vote being a proportional system will mean most, if not all, councils in Scotland will be run by either a coalition or a minority administration. No one party can force through an agenda without broader agreement. The age of consensus politics may finally be coming to Scottish local government.

Labour used to try and argue that coalitions made for unstable governance. Unsurprisingly this all stopped when they entered in coalition at Holyrood. They do though still try and maintain that Single Transferable Vote is bad as someone having more than one councillor breaks the councillor-ward link. This is, of course, total bunkum. People seem to get by perfectly well with having one MP, seven Members of the European Parliament and eight Members of the Scottish Parliament representing them. The only thing that the Single Transferable Vote breaks is the stranglehold that Labour holds over parts of this country. Single Transferable Vote elections present the people of Scotland with a chance to have their views more clearly represented in the make-up of their councils. It presents parties like mine an opportunity to show that there is a real alternative to the Labour oligarchy which has been dominant for so long. Single Transferable Vote certainly presents the parties challenges with regard to the size of the ward and also boundaries, but this is a small price to pay in return for a fairer electoral system.