

The day Scotland's rainbow parliament turned grey by Alan McCombes

By any standards this was a massacre for the left. The red-green presence in Holyrood, represented by the Scottish Socialist Party, the Greens and Solidarity was slashed from 15 to two. Of the six-strong group of independents, only Margo MacDonald was left standing. May 3rd 2007 was the day that Scotland's rainbow parliament was turned a drab prison grey. The wipe out of the socialist left was made all the more bitter by the final electoral arithmetic of the new parliament. Last Thursday marked the end of Labour's monolithic stranglehold over Scottish politics at national and local level. The emergence of the SNP as the biggest party in Scotland by the narrowest possible margin will not lead to instant independence, the removal of nuclear weapons from the Clyde, or even the demise of the Council Tax. But it is likely to open up a new, turbulent phase in Scottish politics, a time of strife, which could accelerate the ultimate break-up of the United Kingdom and pave the way for the resurgence of socialism. After the horrendous internal strife within the left over the past year, and with the socialist movement bitterly divided, the SSP went into this election in a brutally realistic frame of mind. This was a damage limitation exercise. At best, the party hoped to maintain a fragile toehold in Holyrood in preparation for better days to come. Yet no-one expected the sheer scale of the collapse of the socialist vote, down by 100,000 votes from 2003. The final tally of votes appeared completely out of synch with the attitude of voters on the streets and at polling stations, which was open and receptive to the politics of the SSP. The Greens too were stunned by the scale of their losses. On the morning after the election, shell-shocked Green MSPs admitted that they had been expecting to win nine seats. Although Solidarity polled more votes than the SSP, the failure of Tommy Sheridan in Glasgow was the biggest shock result of the night, leaving Solidarity activists visibly traumatised. At the start of the campaign, the bookmakers William Hill had offered odds of 100-1 on Sheridan being re-elected – the kind of odds that might be offered on rain falling in Glasgow sometime in the next six months.

Every media and academic commentator predicted that Tommy Sheridan would retain his seat in Glasgow, while the SSP would be wiped out. As the political pundit, Professor Bill Miller, admitted on Scottish Television the day after the election, "We all expected the SSP to lose all its seats, but none of us expected Tommy Sheridan to lose." Sheridan, the most famous celebrity politician in Scotland, even enjoyed the open sympathy of the mass circulation local newspaper in Glasgow, the Evening Times. As well as forecasting his certain victory - and the defeat of the SSP - the paper even carried a sycophantic double page spread in the final week, headlined the House of Sheridan – festooned with photographs of the Sheridan family. This election has been a serious setback for socialism; it would be futile to pretend otherwise. It is also a tragedy for the thousands of people who had come to rely on Scottish Socialist MSPs to deal with their problems. In Glasgow, for example, Rosie Kane and her caseworker met with queues of asylum seekers facing deportation. These cases are often a matter, literally, of life and death. Other MSPs have tended to hide behind the coat-tails of Westminster, refusing to deal with asylum because it is a reserved issue. Sadly one of these MSPs was Tommy Sheridan, who refused to dirty his hands with asylum casework after leaving the SSP to form Solidarity. Within the parliament too, the SSP has provided a voice for workers in struggle, and for others who were too poor or marginalised to be of any interest to the big mainstream parties. Holyrood will be a poorer place without the Scottish Socialist group of MSPs. There is no single explanation for the debacle of May 3rd. The incineration of the left was the product of a combination of inflammable ingredients. In the first place, all of the smaller parties and independents were mangled in a classic political squeeze, in which two parties were running neck and neck. In this election, the drama was heightened by the fact that one of the two parties stands for dissolution of the United Kingdom, thus polarising Scotland into two camps: pro and anti-union. These two juggernauts had vast propaganda resources at their disposal. While the SSP was forced

to fight this election on a shoestring budget of just £30,000, the SNP had a war chest of £1.5million - ploughed in by big business, including a £500,000 donation from the reactionary Stagecoach tycoon, Brian Souter.

Labour, meanwhile, was gifted literally millions of pounds of free advertising from Scotland's mass circulation tabloid press, notably the Sun and the Daily Record.

Despite the party's cosy rapprochement with elements of Scottish big business, many left wing voters - including it appears most of those who voted SSP in 2003 - swung behind the SNP in this election.

Alf Young of the Herald - one of Scotland's most incisive and experienced pro-Labour analysts - pointed out the irony behind that shift:

"The far-left took out its anger over New Labour, Blair and Iraq by backing a party which, while sharing their goal of Scottish independence, has even less interest than Gordon Brown in bringing the pillars of modern capitalism crashing down."

The small print of Alex Salmond's economic policies were drowned out by the headline promises of an independence referendum, the removal of nuclear weapons, Scottish troops out of Iraq and more immediately, the scrapping of the Council Tax.

Labour, the LibDems and the Tories have all been tested in government in recent times, either at Westminster or Holyrood level, while the SNP is as yet untarnished by power.

As we go to press, the LibDems have spurned Alex Salmond's advances to form a coalition. That means that the SNP are likely to form a minority government, possibly with the involvement of the two Green MSPs.

However, with the SNP up against the much larger bloc of unionist MSPs, it is unlikely that an independence referendum can be achieved before 2008.

The other key flagship policy of the SNP - replacing the Council Tax with a three pence rise in income tax - may also have to be shelved.

The economics of the policy do not add up. It would leave a black hole in council budgets of half a billion pounds, forcing cuts elsewhere. Moreover, although a deal could possibly be reached with the Liberal Democrats over the scrapping of the Council Tax, the Greens have in the past voted against an income-based tax - which means that the policy could be scuppered by the narrowest of margins, even with LibDem support.

Paradoxically, a minority SNP government could

potentially create a more favourable climate for a future surge towards independence. A stable SNP-led coalition would involve backdoor deals, horse-trading and shoddy compromises with the LibDems, allowing Labour the opportunity to recapture some ground.

In contrast, a minority SNP government could allow Salmond to portray the SNP as a party which is trying to introduce radical changes, but is being blocked and obstructed at every turn by the three unionist parties.

Either way, the sands of Scottish politics are shifting. The socialist left may have been marginalised for the time being, but that can change rapidly and dramatically in the future.

It is not much more than year ago that the political obituaries were being written for the SNP after the Dunfermline West by-election - the SNP's worst by-election performance since 1982.

A procession of political pundits pronounced the terminal decline of the SNP and the unstoppable march of the Liberal Democrats

As one commentator, Chris Deerin, expressed it in Scotland on Sunday: "Nichol Stephen is youngish, moderate and attractive. Salmond, in contrast, wears a sullen air... the perception that they have failed to develop as an alternative government, makes him, and them, an unattractive prospect. The LibDems are succeeding where the SNP have repeatedly failed... The SNP cannot turn second place into first."

Even within the SSP at the time, some members (who later left to join Solidarity) drew the conclusion that the SNP was finished, the LibDems were now the main opposition force in Scotland, and the idea of independence was all but dead and buried.

Fifteen months later, and the SNP are now Scotland's biggest party and about to form a government.

As sure as the sun rises in the morning, the socialist left will be back with vengeance in the future. And whatever the arithmetical breakdown last Thursday, the only socialist party with the capacity of coming back from this defeat is the Scottish Socialist Party.

The SSP fought this election with dignity and restraint. We also fought a highly political campaign, with a 450-point manifesto, including the boldest and most radical policy of any party in this election - free public transport.

In contrast, Solidarity exposed itself as an embittered personality cult around Tommy Sheridan.

The 16-point manifesto of the breakaway party, along with its other election material, prominently

featured photographs of Sheridan, his wife and his two year old daughter. His name appeared on every ballot paper, including even for the local council elections.

A large part of the Solidarity vote was an expression of sympathy for Tommy Sheridan based on confusion and misunderstanding of the facts that led to the split in the socialist movement, rather than a conscious socialist vote.

Tommy Sheridan himself, in his manifesto, on TV, and at public meetings repeatedly accused the SSP of lies, dishonesty and backstabbing.

That is the prospectus upon which Solidarity was created: that Tommy Sheridan was the victim of a plot to remove him as party convenor; that the SSP leadership manufactured allegations about Sheridan's personal life to justify his removal; that the party leadership forged documents to back up these allegations; that members of the SSP conspired to pervert the course of justice and in order to destroy Sheridan.

The entire Solidarity edifice has been built upon this fairy tale, and will come crashing to the ground as the lies unravel and the truth emerges.

In the meantime, for wide sections of the public, including for many ex-SSP supporters, there is no smoke without fire. The allegations against the SSP have not yet been disproved. At the very least, people are inclined to lay the blame equally on both sides.

The events of the last two years have been complex and labyrinthine. But the stark facts are these.

Like Jeffrey Archer and Jonathan Aitken, two top Tory politicians who served lengthy jail sentences for their actions, Tommy Sheridan took out a libel action based on a fraud: at least some of the material published in the trashy tabloid News of the World was substantially true.

The SSP did everything it could to dissuade Sheridan from this insanely reckless legal case. We predicted that this grotesquely selfish and deceitful course of action could lead to the destruction of everything that had been built over decades by hundreds and thousands of socialist activists.

But Sheridan carried on regardless. He dragged scores of people into a legal toxic waste dump against their will. These included innocent people who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and have since had their lives destroyed to protect Sheridan's right to hypocrisy.

The SSP was also dragged into the Court of Session. Our response was to defy the courts and face down a jail sentence.

In the weeks that the SSP was under siege, dragged through the courts, having its offices raided, Sheridan effectively went into hiding, failing to turn up to any of the meetings to decide tactics.

The rest of the SSP stood valiantly against the courts.

Finally, Sheridan emerged to argue that the SSP should now buckle under and surrender the party's internal documents to the News of the World and the courts. His capitulation was backed by those who went on to found Solidarity. So far, so dishonourable.

But worse was to come. In an abysmal display of cowardice, Sheridan told the courts and the media that the documents had been forged by the SSP as part of a plot to fit him up.

To salvage his fake reputation, he denounced the SSP leadership as liars, perjurers, forgers and conspirators, before walking out to split the left and wreck the socialist unity project, built up over a decade and more.

The mainstream press, cowed by the courts and the threat of libel action – and perhaps also by the fear of jeopardising an ongoing police investigation into perjury and conspiracy to pervert the course of justice – have never been prepared to bring out these facts.

As a result, the SSP was fighting this election under a cloud of suspicion. To pretend otherwise would be to run away from reality.

However, two or three years down the road, the events of the past year will have begun to fade into the mists of history. With the removal of Tommy Sheridan from Holyrood, the Solidarity bubble will burst.

That will be a massive step forward for the left, allowing Scottish socialism to be rebuilt under the clean banner of the SSP.

Spoiling tactics turned confusion to **fiasco**

“It’s not who votes that counts, it’s who counts the votes” said Josef Stalin.

The New Labour establishment could have taught the commissars of the old Soviet Union a thing or two about manipulating elections.

If 100,000 votes had been disqualified in Venezuela, politicians and newspaper editors would be calling for the tanks to be sent in to restore democracy.

In Scotland, it looks like the response to this mass disenfranchisement of a vast swathe of the electorate will be a whitewash, with the Electoral Commission asked to investigate the Electoral Commission.

Alex Salmond, the SNP leader, has called for a full judicial inquiry – a call that has been rejected by the man responsible for the debacle, the Scottish Secretary, Douglas Alexander.

In Glasgow, lawyer Mike Dailly has begun legal proceedings.

The SSP should support both of these moves. This democratic abomination was not the result of incompetence by the Scotland Office.

It was a product of a deliberate, cynical manoeuvre by New Labour politicians to confuse the public and marginalise the smaller parties.

Since 1999, Labour has consciously undermined local democracy by refusing to separate the council elections from the Holyrood elections. In this election, when council elections were conducted for the first time under PR, the case for a change was overwhelming.

But it was never put before the Scottish Parliament. A Tory MSP had begun to initiate a private members bill, but, after what appeared to be backdoor wheeling and dealing, dropped the proposal.

Even worse was the decision to swap the order of the Holyrood ballot papers and to include the constituency and regional votes on a single form for the first time.

This was a deliberate subversion of democracy, designed to protect the big parties and undermine the diversity of Holyrood.

The SNP went along with this ploy, hoping that they too would benefit from the confusion. They opportunistically attempted to manipulate the new arrangements by renaming their party “Alex Salmond for First Minister – SNP”, reinforcing the confusion that already existed.

The SSP can report numerous examples of voters – including even party members – marking their X against Alex Salmond then scrolling down the

regional list to vote SSP. All of these votes would have been discounted.

Ironically, the SNP’s tactic has almost certainly backfired on the party. Their cunning plan was that voters would back Alex Salmond on the left side of the paper, then be forced to vote again for the SNP on the right side of the ballot paper when they realised that the smaller parties were not listed on that side.

What the SNP failed to anticipate was that a large proportion of voters would mark both their crosses on the left side of the ballot paper.

Because the regional and constituency ballot papers were not physically separate, tens of thousands of people appear to have believed that it didn’t matter which side they marked their two crosses.

This would not only distort downwards the vote for the smaller parties; it would also negate many thousands of constituency votes, particularly for the SNP.

Without a full analysis of every paper, it is impossible to say how the results were affected by confusion.

However it is wishful thinking for Tommy Sheridan to claim he was robbed of a seat in Glasgow. The claim that with just a few hundred more votes, Solidarity would have won a seat in Glasgow is pure fiction. Out of around 10,000 disqualified regional votes in Glasgow, Sheridan would have required 2,200 to beat the Greens and 2,600 extra votes to beat the SNP – and even that would be based on the far-fetched assumption that neither of these parties had any disqualified votes!

In Glasgow as elsewhere, it is likely that the vote for the SSP, the Greens, Solidarity and a range of other small parties would have been significantly higher, but nowhere near enough to affect the outcome.

Nonetheless, this distortion of democracy blatantly discriminates against the most deprived voters in the poorest constituencies who are already disproportionately excluded from electoral politics.

The constituency with the highest number of disqualified papers, Glasgow Shettleston, was also the constituency with the lowest turnout in Scotland – just 33 per cent.

And by the way, just in case you didn’t know – Shettleston also tops the UK league table for poverty and deprivation.