

LEFT AT THE POLLS: THE CHANGING FAR-LEFT VOTE

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Part of the steady erosion of traditional voting patterns in recent years has been the emergence of a small but significant far-left vote. In the past, socialist grouplets have stood in elections with a cheerful disregard for the number of votes secured by their candidates. Such was the case with the ill-fated Workers' Revolutionary Party, polling 0.1% at Dumbartonshire in February 1974, and the International Marxist Group who polled an earth-thudding 0.3% at Queens Park in the same general election. These candidatures have usually had a limited function. As long as a handful of individuals could be recruited through the hard work, tears and downright humiliation of polling less than the self-confessed novelty candidates, then all was well with the world. The bandwagon could keep, if not exactly 'rolling on', then at least stumbling sideways from time to time.

In recent years there has been a change in the character of left candidatures, culminating in the election of Tommy Sheridan to the Scottish Parliament. This may, at first sight, appear to be something of a blip on the political landscape, nothing for the electoral big boys to be too concerned about, but a solid core of the far-left vote has been built up over a number of years and is comparatively stable. It is not simply going to go away. Those who are still unconvinced of the significance of this new generation of independent socialist organisations might also take a look across the Channel, where Lutte Ouvrière, a Trotskyist organisation with only around 2000 core members, jumped from 2% to 5.4% of the poll in the 1995 Presidential elections, winning 1.6 million votes, a success that did not go unnoticed by the far-left on this side of the Channel (Coffney and Milne 1997, pp.64-7, pp.120-121; **Scottish Militant** 5 May 1995). Something broadly similar now seems to be happening here, but to secure further success in domestic elections, socialist

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groupings will have to pursue a slightly different path. Before their recent surge, Lutte Ouvrière spent the previous twenty-five years patiently nursing a more modest vote, and much of the past decade coaxing supporters of a moribund, but largish, French Communist Party, to come over to them. Britain's new socialist groupings do not have the same sort of established Communist Party electoral tradition to feed from.

THE COMMUNIST PARTY'S ELECTORAL RECORD IN SCOTLAND

The absence of such a tradition has been at the heart of scepticism about the possibility of any new socialist organisation winning a respectable 4% or 5% across key working-class constituencies; even those rare commentators who have considered the Scottish Militant vote worthy of analysis have also treated it as a marginally interesting hangover from the poll-tax campaign, a ripple in the waters politic which will eventually wear itself out, given time (Rawlings and Thrasher 1997, pp.149-50).

At one level, the Communist Party's electoral performance at its highpoint does have to be treated differently from the recent far-left vote. The CP were much larger and operated in a different sort of political period. However, the experience of the Communist Party is relevant in a much more basic sense. It shows that the great British electorate, and its disgruntled Scottish component, have been prepared to vote for the far-left in respectable numbers in the not-too-distant past. If today's socialist groupings have had to begin their electoral work from scratch, it is not because of some deep-seated British rejection of all things extreme (the phrase 'no sects please, we're British' springs to mind). It has much more to do with the specific failures of the British Communist Party and its pattern of opportunities squandered and constituencies dropped for no good, or readily-apparent, reason.

Above all, the Communist Party's electoral record reveals a degree of ineptitude which suggests that something else must have been going on, which of course there was. The successive political lurches of the CP during the crucial period from 1930 to 1950 caused them to lose ground which no amount of hard work or enthusiasm could make up for once they were finally cast adrift by a Moscow regime which was no longer in need of their services. Other Communist Parties, in France and Italy, became larger at an earlier stage in their development, restricting the scope for electoral misadventure. They were simply too big not to stand candidates when the opportunity offered. The British party, by contrast, were cursed with a

choice, to stand or not to stand, and in the end they did both on the wrong occasions. In the halcyon days of the 1920s, they started out as a serious contender at the polls, although organisational inexperience meant that early electoral success was more than they could cope with. In 1922 Walter Newbold was elected as the Communist MP for Motherwell, promptly caught the Westminster disease and (rather embarrassingly) resigned from the party (Duncan 1993).

Elsewhere, in constituencies such as Greenock and Kelvingrove, they averaged well over 30% in successive elections before the disaster of 1929 flattened their support out, leaving the CP with a larger number of more modest results (Craig 1975, pp.18-30). Still, they did manage to defy their own low-point of membership by mounting a challenge to the National Government during its landslide victory of 1931. While the majority swung behind the National Government, the CP pushed their minority vote up from its 1929 total of 50,634 (an average 5.1%) to 74,824 (7.6%). In Scotland the jump was even more noticeable and included minor successes of 4-7% in the city-centre constituencies of Springburn, the Gorbals and Edinburgh Central where they had no previous track record. Similarly at Dundee, their vote climbed from 3.6% to 5.8%. Not a staggering leap, but at least it was moving in the right direction. In the main established constituencies the results were every bit as promising: at West Fife 21.1% (up from 20.5%); Bothwell 6.5% (up from 5.5%); and especially Aberdeen 11.2% (up from 5.8%). These figures were encouraging.

Their only drop anywhere was an understandable fall from 20.4% down to 18.2% at Greenock, but at that level of support the most important thing was consolidation rather than the romantic prospect of putting Communist seats onto Parliamentary benches. All other things being equal, MPs would follow in due course. The improvement continued at by-elections, with a 7.5% poll at the Dumbarton by-election a year later, more fresh electoral territory for the CP built upon a strong organisational presence in the area (Macintyre 1980, pp.79-108). These were utterly respectable figures, made more significant by Labour's own collapse at the 1931 polls (even if the extent of the collapse was exaggerated by the peculiarities of the electoral system).

Having ridden the storm when the idea of a National Government was popular, the CP chose not to stand when support for the Government had waned. 1935 saw CP gains at the local elections, the winning of two councillors at Cowdenbeath, and one each at Perth and Clydebank. At Lochgelly a sitting Communist councillor held onto his seat and in the Vale of Leven a local deal was struck with the Labour Party and other sections of

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the left, resulting in their combined takeover of the District Council, with the CP holding the largest single group of seats (Macintyre 1980, pp.104-105). Then at the General Election, with the exception of 2 constituencies, they chose not to stand because of Labour's continuing malaise. The recent (and final) World Congress of the Communist International, in July-August 1935, had resolved that the task of national Communist Parties was to make friends and influence people within the Social Democratic and Labour parties. In Britain this involved making sure that the CP could not be accused of interfering with the recovery of Labour at the polls. As it was not possible to reproduce the circumstances of the Vale of Leven elsewhere, the simplest way to do this was for the CP to withdraw, which they did, even in those constituencies where the CP had polled over 10% at the previous general election. It was a gesture of unrequited affection for a Labour Party which would probably have been much more ready to cut a deal with the Communist Party if they had been able to show continuing muscle at the polls.

True, one of the CP's remaining two candidates, Willie Gallagher, was elected as the MP for West Fife in 1935 (a result which the recent local elections had indicated as probable anyway) but he was elected as the figurehead of an organisation which had all too publicly given up the idea of challenging Labour at the polls. While Gallagher's election has, at various times, been cited in defence of the Communist Party's electoral record, the decision to end their electoral challenge to Labour quickly led to Gallagher's normalization; he became another colourful part of Britain's quirky Parliamentary landscape (McKinnon 1980, p.23).

While the party managed to hold onto West Fife immediately after the war, they were of diminishing electoral significance everywhere else, and were unable to resist the anti-communist lurch in public opinion at the 1950 General Election. Not only did Gallagher lose his seat, but across Scotland the CP's 16 candidates polled an average of only 4.1% (and less when the distortion of the Fife vote was removed). In absolute terms, the figure was still not too bad but the trend was clearly downwards.

They managed to push the figure back up by a couple of percentage points in 1955, but only at the expense of dropping most of their candidatures. After the watershed of the Russian invasion of Hungary the following year, there really was only one way to go. Electorally they wilted in the face of Labour's strength; politically they were disorientated by the revelations of Stalin's butchery; and intellectually they were outpaced by a New Left aligned to

anti-Stalinism, to the Trotskyists and to a new generation of Labour lefts associated with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

The poor state of party fortunes by the early 1960s prompted a belated rationalisation of electoral activities. A small number of constituencies was targeted and canvassed with a new degree of consistency, and, as a result of this solid work there was a slight blip in their electoral fortunes in the later 1960s. The blip carried on into Jimmy Reid's poll of 5,928 (14.6%) at Dumbarton Central in February 1974, an echo of Reid's popularity as leader of the unsuccessful UCS work-in of 1971-72 (Reid 1976, pp.116-124, pp.154-166). Elsewhere, in February 1974, the CP lost their other 43 UK deposits. When the Wilson Government was forced to go to the polls again in October, the CP vote finally came crashing down to 17,426 across Britain, the worst poll in the party's history. The bubble had finally burst. By the advent of the Thatcher Government in 1979, there was already little rhyme or reason to their choice of constituencies. The irregularities of residual local CP activism had displaced any sort of coherent national policy (**Marxism Today**, November 1983, p.30).

AFTER THE CP

During this long decline, various groupings tried to appropriate the CP's modest electoral base. The most successful challenge was also the earliest, coming from a New Left grouping, the Fife Socialist League (Thompson 1978, pp.207-225). Operating conveniently in Willie Gallagher's old constituency they came directly from the bowels of the Communist Party as part of the exodus of members in 1956. Polling impressively at a local level, they won 1,085 votes in the 1958 local elections, and 4,886 in the General Election of 1959, with their candidate, Lawrence Daly (a rising star within the miners union), pushing the CP into third place (Allen 1981, pp.124-125).

However, they were a geographically and socially isolated group, a manual working-class body within the predominantly student (and to some degree white-collar) milieu of the New Left. After six years of carrying the support of dissident ex-communists, the FSL collapsed into left-wing activism in the local miners union. Elsewhere in Scotland, the New Left had no noticeably working-class base, and tended to gravitate towards the Labour Party in order to find one. When they got there they found that the disciplined Trotskyist groupings, whose own open work had ground to a halt at the end of the Second World War, were already present in some force (Milligan 1995, pp.115-116).

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By the mid-to-late 1970s the largest of these Trotskyist groupings was the Socialist Workers Party. Having left the Labour Party at the first available opportunity, they entertained brief hopes of capturing at least a section of the CP's rapidly declining vote. Between 1976 and 1978 the SWP stood in nine tester by-elections across Britain, polling an initial 1.5% and 1.9% at Walsall and Newcastle in November 1976. Not a staggering result, but not a negligible one, and broadly in line with the kind of votes that the CP were turning out in their latter years.

It was enough to make some of the smaller groupings take note and form a 'Socialist Unity' campaign aiming to outflank the SWP. With a smaller national base, and without the consequent organisational commitments of the SWP, the Socialist Unity groups were able to throw everything they had at individual by-elections, particularly targeting those seats where the SWP had chosen to stand (Williamson 1979, pp.73-74). The results of this clash were disastrous. The far-left groupings were politically indistinguishable as far as the voters were concerned, and the division of their vote brought the average SWP poll down to 1% in 1977. In the early months of 1978 they tried a further couple of by-elections (including one at Glasgow Garscadden) just to make sure, and then reluctantly shelved electoral work for the immediate future (**SWP Bulletin** May 1978, p.3).

It was not until the recent Scottish Parliamentary Elections that the SWP finally turned back to electoral work, but cautiously so, standing a group of five candidates in alliance with Tommy Sheridan's Scottish Socialist Party. They polled modestly well, but below the level secured by other organisations of a similar size. In part this was due to the tentative nature of their 1999 campaign. The SWP started much later than everyone else, prioritising a UNISON demonstration in Newcastle over the elections, and they paid the price for this miscalculation. When their campaign was finally launched with just over three weeks to go, the media was already losing its interest in minority candidatures and narrowing the focus of coverage down to the main struggle between Labour and the SNP.

The subordinate role given by the SWP to electoral work is in sharp contrast to their main rivals on the left, the Scottish Socialist Party, a lineal descendent of the Militant group which spent much of the 1970s growing rather anonymously inside the Labour Party, and then spent the 1980s rather less anonymously trying not to be kicked out of it (Crick 1986, pp.191, 272). Their final decision to 'go it alone' in the early 1990s was effectively taken for them by the winding-up of Labour's youth wing, and by the wave of expulsions which followed the Miners strike of 1984-85. By the time Militant

finally left the Labour Party, much of their work was already being carried out elsewhere, particularly in the Anti Poll-Tax organisations which (in Scotland at least) Militant played a key role in setting up (Rawlings and Thrasher 1997, pp.149-50).

Whereas the SWP have never had any qualms about operating out in the open, and continue to secure much of their recruitment through sales of their paper, the old Militant group and its successors have often shown a preference for operating through various other organisations. This gives descendant organisations, such as Tommy Sheridan's SSP, a tendency towards the consolidation of a hard-core of activists and a more-or-less sizeable periphery of supporters and occasional activists whose levels of activity fluctuate as individual campaigns gain and lose momentum. Other political differences between the groups centre upon the Militant tendency to equate socialism with nationalisation, and (at least publicly) to offer the prospect of some sort of electoral road to socialism (Crick 1986, pp.82-83). The SWP, by contrast, have always equated socialism with workers control, to be brought about through mass strike action, a system of workers' councils, and ultimate confrontation between this system and Parliament (i.e. revolution). They do not claim that this sort of political change is likely to happen tomorrow, but they do hold that it is ultimately necessary to the establishment of socialism, Parliamentary institutions being too deeply embedded in capitalist relations of production to allow them to be reformed (German 1992, pp.29-34, pp.42-49).

Whatever the virtues of these competing viewpoints, both organisational traditions share common problems associated with their size. Given the number and average scale of the Militant/SSP's electoral campaigns (each involving circa 15-25 members) and the SWP's total of around a dozen branches in Scotland, it is a fairly safe estimate that neither group has more than a thousand active members in Scotland. Discounting the SWP's comparatively successful organisation for student sympathizers, and the (Militant-derived) Scottish Socialist Party's large paper membership, both organisations may well have closer to around 300-500 activists. In absolute terms these sorts of figures are not terribly impressive, but in the absence of any effective Labour left or youth wing, and with a comparatively machine-centred SNP-left focusing their efforts upon narrowly-electoral work, 500-1000 committed socialist activists is more than enough to sustain a modest public profile in Scotland's major cities.

THE INITIAL CANDIDATURES

The string of recent electoral successes for the far-left began at the end of the mobilisation against the poll-tax, with Tommy Sheridan's candidature in the 1992 General Election. Running his campaign from Saughton prison (which was probably a great deal less romantic than it sounds) Sheridan polled an impressive 6287 votes (19.3%) at Pollok while Labour's vote crashed by almost 10,000. The candidature was a publicity coup of sorts, but it also depended upon the solid work carried out in the Anti Poll-Tax groups (Sheridan and McAlpine 1994, p.221). There was more to come. With an enthusiastic core of activists looking for a campaign to replace the poll-tax, Scottish Militant Labour took the plunge and stood seven candidates in the May 1992 District Elections, winning surprise victories at Baillieston, Pollok, South Nitshill and Queenslie. Their overall vote of 6659 marginally exceeded Sheridan's total of a month earlier and accounted for a staggering 40.2% of the poll in these divisions.

Flushed with success, the candidatures continued at the Regional Council by-elections in September, with the SML vote averaging out at 45.2% and winning them seats at Easterhouse and Queenslie and Barlanark to the East of the city. With these results the SML had secured a distinctive and locally-popular profile (**The Herald** 30 October 1992). On the negative side, difficulties at the large constituency of Govan and Drumoyne foreshadowed the repeated problems they were to meet when trying to carry out electoral work nearer to the city centre. While support remained precariously centred upon a number of key housing estates, there were early indications that a much larger vote could be won if the SML could overcome their basic logistical problems. Tommy Sheridan's set-piece candidature at the 1994 Euro Elections, a year and a half after the first wave of council elections, secured 12,113 votes, 7.6% across Glasgow, and almost double the absolute figure won in 1992.

The 1994 Euro campaign was a high point that was difficult to match, although the drop-off in support at the single-tier council elections a year later was not particularly great or obviously damaging. In spite of the enormous demands upon their organisation, the SML managed to spread themselves across 19 Glasgow constituencies in 1995. Almost inevitably, the outcome was a trade-off between breadth of support and individual results. Overall they polled 8470 votes but dropped down to an average vote of 22.58%, which was some way adrift from the giddy heights of 1992. By spreading themselves thinner, they lost all but one of their six council seats;

only Sheridan polled more than a thousand, allowing him to hold onto Pollok.

In retrospect, the trade-off was a good one, but it went to the heart of the SML's difficulties. As an electoral force they were not large enough to win a majority on the Glasgow Council. They could not stand anywhere near enough candidates to win. On the other hand, it is not at all clear that any great organisational gains were made through these campaigns. Information given in the pages of **Scottish Militant** during and after the 1995 council elections shows that they could expect to win around six to a dozen recruits per campaign. At Wellhouse, for example, they polled a good 559 votes (31%) in a campaign run by a group of 25 supporters, but they came out of it with only six new recruits (**Scottish Militant** 21 and 28 April 1995). The figures were similar for other constituencies, with 7 new members at Cumbernauld, and 12 at Drumchapel. These were good figures for an organisation of Militant's size, but once adjusted for a largish short-term drop-out rate (when the politically intense atmosphere of an election wears off) and then balanced against the fact that there are only so many elections, it becomes obvious that no small organisation can become a 'mass organisation' in such a piecemeal fashion.

It is not even obvious that Militant grew significantly between 1992 and 1995, during the initial years of their electoral work. The rapid succession of candidatures in Glasgow may even have accelerated an established pattern of geographical contraction, with Glasgow acting as a steady drain upon organisation elsewhere. During the 1980s, Militant's control over the Labour Party youth wing gave them a presence wherever there was a branch of the Labour Party Young Socialists, so much so that Militant could afford to largely neglect organisation in the Universities (where there was much greater right-wing opposition inside the Labour Clubs).

During the 1990s, their paper **Scottish Militant** rarely advertised local meetings, and only with the recent launch of a new SSP paper **Socialist Voice** has this situation changed. From 1992-1995, the unhelpful impression was given that the Glasgow area simply was their Scottish organisation, albeit with minor satellite groups elsewhere. In cases where work was systematically carried out in other parts of the country, such as Dundee, the pattern appeared to be one of a sudden blitz rather than sustained intervention. Over time, this has changed, with Tayside receiving more attention than anywhere else. When the SML took the plunge and stood candidates in a limited number of areas outside of Glasgow in the 1995 local elections, there was a heavy weighting of work towards Dundee. While they

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stood in individual seats across the Central Belt, at Dundee they stood a slate of five candidates.

The choice of Dundee was not arbitrary. It was a by-product of SML work around the protracted and high-profile Timex strike of 1993. During the strike their local profile was secondary to that of the Socialist Workers Party. The SWP developed a more notable presence amongst the strikers, and an even stronger one within the Support Committee. As the picket-line confrontations escalated, with 38 arrests taking place on a single day in May, police raids were carried out upon the homes of leading members of the Timex Workers' Support Group. To all intents and purposes the raids centred upon the two local SWP branches (**Daily Record** 18 May 1993). In contrast, the SML's profile peaked when Tommy Sheridan came to the picket line, but otherwise their work was carried out in the background (they helped to run-off Strike Bulletins, and so on). Their overall focus was concentrated away from the strike, and centred upon preparations for an electoral campaign in the nearby housing estates (Sheridan and McAlpine 1994, pp.248-150).

When the local elections came along in 1995, the Tayside results fell short of the high standards set in Glasgow. Their best poll was for a long-standing East of Scotland Militant member B. Wallace who polled 141 votes (22.9%) at Ardler. Elsewhere, at Hilltown, Gillburn, Trottick and Whitfield South they polled between 5.8 and 7.9 %. However, there was a further side-effect of the Timex dispute. It helped to move both the SWP and Scottish Militant Labour out of the decades-long shadow cast over the Tayside left by the Communist Party. And while the focus of SWP and SML activism diverged after the strike, that of Militant was close enough to the traditional pattern of Communist Party activity to arouse some interest among both organisations in the possibility of joint electoral work.

THE SCOTTISH SOCIALIST ALLIANCE

Joint work was a necessity that the SML were increasingly being driven towards, even in Glasgow. The unitary authority elections of 1995 had shown that by trying to extend their geographical base, they were running the risk of an electoral spillage outwards from Pollok and Baillieston. For every vote won elsewhere, there was a loss of votes at the core. Militant organiser Richie Venton noted that there were 'seats where we didn't have the time and the forces to canvass'. Even to consolidate support across Glasgow they were going to need some help (**Scottish Militant**, 14 and 21 April 1995). As good fortune would have it, there was a modest pool of helpers who were only too

eager to associate themselves with the SML's success. There were residual (and somewhat traditionalist) members of the Communist Party around Dundee; members of the smaller far-left groups around Edinburgh; youngish left-wing SNPers, associated with a magazine called **Liberation** (who had found that the SNP looked a lot less radical from the inside); together with members of the Labour-left Socialist Movement (once a focus for left regroupment, but by 1995 more of a name than an organisation). The numbers involved (over 350 at the founding meeting of a formal alliance in February 1996) were at least adequate to sustain the existing pattern of electoral work around Glasgow, as long as enough common political ground could be found (**Morning Star**, 12 February 1996, 10, 13 and 17 November 1995).

What pushed reluctant groupings such as the Communist Party towards support for a specifically-electoral alliance (which could only be centred upon Militant's existing pattern of intervention) was the unexpected and impending danger of being outflanked by an England-based breakaway from the Labour Party led by Arthur Scargill. In November 1995 Scargill announced that he was going to launch a new Socialist Labour Party (**Glasgow Herald** 9 November 95; **Morning Star** 15 January 1996). The comparatively restrained divisions which had marked the Militant-led Scottish Alliance at its earliest meetings now gave way to divisions between the Scots and Scargill, with the arguments turning around two crucial aspects of the proposed constitution of Scargill's new SLP. Firstly, there was to be no joint membership with other political organisations, supposedly to ensure that members had to break openly with Labour in order to join (which was rather superfluous given that they would be thrown out anyway) but geared to exclude the existing far-left activist traditions of Militant and the SWP.

Secondly, there was the question of the Scots, and primarily the non-Militant sections of the emerging Scottish Socialist Alliance, who insisted that the Scottish area of any new organisation should be autonomous and committed to a broadly left-nationalist platform. The outcome of the argument was a pulling together of the (Militant derived) Scottish Socialist Alliance and the emergence of a separate Socialist Labour Party under the leadership of Arthur Scargill. Both organisations polled well in the subsequent General Election, but the Socialist Alliance was clearly the dominant Scottish force:

Table 1
The Far Left in the 1997 General Election

	Votes	Candidates	Average vote %
Scottish Socialist Alliance	9,740	16	1.83
SLP, Scotland	1,792	3	1.60
Militant, England	5,135	16	1.16
SLP, England	46,613	55	1.82
TOTAL	65,832	93	1.72

The dispute helped to reduce the differences within the Scottish Socialist Alliance, with Militant choosing to adopt a more 'Scottish' platform. In the earlier Alliance days, the SML were still concerned to 'avoid becoming boxed into the single option of independence - which may or may not be the route by which the Scottish working class travels towards socialism in the future' (**Scottish Militant** 23 June 1995, 11 August 1995; **Liberation** No.8, 1995). By 1998, they had moved all the way towards echoing John Maclean's call for a Scottish Socialist Republic, a policy-shift enthusiastically endorsed by various previously-sceptical allies whose contributions to the Alliance's bi-annual magazine **Red** showed them to be favourable towards left-nationalism anyway (**Red** No.1, pp.14-15; No.2, 1996, pp.8). This Scottish platform finally allowed the Militant supporters to win the argument for the formation of a new Scottish Socialist Party, pulling the less cohesive alliance into better shape and allowing for a more complete break from the organisation's associations with the old Militant Tendency.

While support for independence secured the allegiance of some allies, it also made the prospect of any fusion with Scargill's forces, or with the SWP, increasingly remote. Both of these organisations remain hostile to any form of Scots nationalism, although the SWP did call for a 'yes, yes' vote in the referendum on the Scottish Parliament stating that to do otherwise would be to line-up with the British state (**Socialist Worker** 13 September 1997). Since the initial arguments, the SLP have also softened their party line, calling for the Scots Parliament to have the power to tax the rich, and giving a large degree of autonomy to the Scots area of their organisation.

So far, the more nationalistic element of the Scottish Socialist Party platform has been comparatively muted. It helps to divert flak from the SNP, but if the Scots card is overplayed then the danger is that it will reduce the SSP's distinctive appeal. There is, after all, little likelihood of winning substantial sections of the electorate over to a small but militant nationalist organisation when there is a much larger (and seemingly radical) nationalist organisation already in existence. This is the same problem which scuppered the infamous attempts to build a Scottish Labour Party under Jim Sillars in the later 1970s, and it continues to subdue the SSP's commitment to independence (Drucker 1978, pp.133-141).

FROM POLITICAL STALEMATE TO THE 1999 BREAKTHROUGH

While continuing electoral support for the SML, and afterwards for the Scottish Socialist Alliance, remained comparatively impressive between 1995 and 1997, it also had the ominous appearance of a holding operation. At the 1997 General Election they managed to secure a solid 9,740 votes, but again at the expense of continuing localisation nationally and even within Glasgow. The initial Militant breakthrough on the Anti Poll-Tax ticket back in 1992 had come around Pollok and Baillieston. Five years later, this pattern remained essentially the same, but with signs that efforts to spread the vote were beginning to erode support in the core areas. Aggregating the 1995 Council election results into the groups which made up the 1997 parliamentary constituencies, we can provide a comparison between the two (table 2).

A few polls in new areas like Paisley, together with marginal increases of a hundred here and there outside of the Glasgow area (e.g. Dundee, Edinburgh and Cumbernauld) only brought results around the 300-400 votes (or 1%) mark. Together with a strengthened vote around Pollok, these lower, dispersed, votes continued to produce a respectable overall poll for the Alliance, especially given the extent of Labour's landslide elsewhere. But while overall losses in individual constituencies (with the exception of Anniesland and Baillieston) were not catastrophic, they were an indication that, electorally, the Alliance was having extreme difficulties in solving the basic problems of scale and electoral ghettoization.

Table 2
SML and SSA Votes in Glasgow 1995 and 1997

	Council Elections 1995 (SML)	General Election 1997 (SSA)
Anniesland	1078	229
Pollok	2670	3639
Maryhill	240	409
Shettleston	802	482
Baillieston	2947	970
Govan	362	755
Kelvin	-	386
Rutherglen	-	251
Springburn	-	407
Cathcart	371	458
TOTAL	8470	7986

Further confirmation was to come. In November 1997 the Paisley South Parliamentary by-election allowed the Alliance a rare opportunity to focus their activists upon a single constituency where they had some previous electoral standing. With an experienced candidate (the longstanding Militant supporter Frances Curran) the Alliance managed to boost its vote from 146 to 306, placing them just on the right side of 1%, and beating off a rather ill-advised challenge from Arthur Scargill's SLP (*Scotsman*, 8 November 1997). Then came the Garrowhill council by-election in January 1998 where their performance was much less convincing. The constituency fell within the Baillieston area where Militant had been unable to arrest the decline of their support. Only two and a half years earlier, without their allies, Militant had polled 159 votes at Garrowhill. This time around, as part of the Alliance, they polled only 62 votes. On a remarkably low turnout of just under 26%, the SSA had been unable to benefit from a slump in the Labour vote. Instead of turning to the Alliance, voters were simply dropping out (*Scotsman* 23 January 1998).

It was only towards the end of 1998, as the electoral climate began to heat up (with the imminence of political flux and parliamentary change) that a clear shift began to take place. In late November, the North-East Euro by-election showed a massive leap in socialist fortunes. The Alliance, now converted into the new Scottish Socialist Party, and looking much more like a party than just a jumble of reluctant allies, won an impressive 2510 votes in a constituency nowhere near Glasgow. The years of work, and the growing political cohesion of the SSP, were finally paying off.

When the breakthrough came at the elections to the Scottish Parliament in 1999, the main surprises were the sheer scale of the socialist vote and the relative success of the newcomers, Arthur Scargill's SLP, in capturing the second-ballot: table 3.

Table 3
1999 General Election, Regional List

	SSP		SLP	
	votes	%	votes	%
Glasgow	18,581	7.25	4,391	1.71
Highlands and Islands	1,707	0.88	2,808	1.39
Lothians	5,237	1.58	10,895	3.30
Central	5,739	1.74	10,956	3.32
Mid-Scotland and Fife	3,044	1.00	4,260	1.40
North-East	3,016	1.06	3,557	1.25
South	3,304	1.04	13,887	4.36
West	5,944	1.91	4,472	1.44
TOTAL	46,635	2.06	55,232	2.27

The far-left clearly benefited from the incorporation of a degree of PR into the new system, but their vote in the traditional first past the post seats also rose dramatically. In the first ballot their candidates won an average of over 4%, adding up to a total of 31,952 votes.

Table 4
1999 General Election, First Past Post

	Votes	Candidates	Average vote %
SSP	23,927	18	4.97
SLP	5,268	5	3.32
SWP	2,757	5	1.76
TOTAL	31952	28	4.10

When the figures for the second ballot are added, the growing stature and electoral respectability of the far-left organisations becomes clear. They secured over ten thousand votes in four of the eight regions, and over a hundred thousand second-votes across the board. This poses the realistic possibility of the far-left not only holding onto the seat they already have, but also securing a small Parliamentary group at the next Scottish election. The most obvious way to do so would be through some form of agreement between the SSP and the SLP (it would also be worth while to keep the electorally marginal SWP on board, in order to remove unnecessary complications). Such a joint socialist platform would offer the possibility of securing a group of four, perhaps even five, MSPs, even in the absence of any dramatic increase in political radicalisation.

A broader (if more unlikely) second-ballot alliance, between socialists and Greens, might fire the imagination of the electorate (particularly given the current necessary degree of red-green co-operation inside the Scots Parliament) but it would probably not return a greater number of socialists. Although the overall socialist vote is higher, the Greens have a better geographical spread and would be entitled to take too many of the top list-slots. In key constituencies, especially the Lothians, the socialists and Greens are set on a collision course. Whatever else happens next time around, with or without agreement amongst themselves, the socialist groups will have to focus their energies upon capturing a party list seat in the Lothians, and, in the nature of things, their success would probably have to be at the expense of the sitting Green MSP.

What is most problematic about the large socialist vote, particularly in the East, is that much of the turnout for the fledgling SLP was won *in absentia*, with little more than a token presence, a leaflet or two, and, in some traditional mining-areas, an all-important visit by Arthur Scargill. If they are to sustain their support at the polls they will need to develop a real constituency-level presence, and it is here that the SSP has a clear head start. The SLP's lack of any real branch organisation outside of Motherwell and Falkirk becomes painfully obvious when we examine their choice of constituencies, only 5 in all, and in only one of these (Motherwell) had they stood previously in 1997. A measure of shifting about in the other seats allowed the SLP to push up their vote, but only as a result of local fine-tuning rather than geographical spread. In spite of their impressive performance in the second ballot, the SLP did not stand anyone in a first-past-the-post seat further East than Falkirk.

Outside of Falkirk West (where they withdrew to back Dennis Canavan's candidature) the electoral strategy of the SLP was extremely problematic. While they stood in only five conventional seats, they still managed to clash with the SSP in two of them, and even worse, they lost out convincingly on both occasions. To be divisive and to perform badly would seem like political carelessness, yet this has invariably been the result whenever SLP candidates have gone head-to-head with the SSP. The Scottish Socialist Party continues to look like the most likely core of a national organisation. Their conventional candidatures for the Scots Parliament were spread much more widely, across 18 constituencies, and their vote (although still weighted heavily around Glasgow) indicated a growing (if modest) presence elsewhere across the country. With a couple of exceptions, they stood in the same constituencies as 1997, but achieved uniformly better results, more than doubling their total vote, pushing it well over the 20,000 mark for the first time. This is a considerable achievement, given the problems that they faced.

Now come those other difficulties of consolidation, and of deciding what to do about the ongoing internecine feud with the SLP, especially with by-elections looming. A united socialist slate looks like the best option and the lowest-risk strategy, but achieving such unity will be less simple than it sounds, and not only because of factional bickering. In areas of the East of Scotland, where the SLP polled well, but from a distance, it is still the SSP which has the members on the ground. After years of hard work, which now looks like paying off, they are unlikely to be enthusiastic about giving way to an organisation which has no real local presence. While an electoral deal might look good on paper, it would be a disaster if it resulted in any significant drop-off in SSP activism outside of Glasgow. The alternative, and

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perhaps more likely, option, may be for the SSP to try and go it alone, using their comparative success at future by-elections to establish that they are Scotland's only credible socialist electoral force.

This position has its strengths; few people are likely to remember how well the SLP did in May 1999 but everyone will be made painfully aware that Tommy Sheridan is a Member of Parliament. The SSP might also feel that it is best to enter into any negotiations from a position of strength and proven electoral superiority. In order to establish such a total electoral hegemony on the left, the SSP still have to bridge a major credibility gap: they have to demonstrate that they are a national and not a Glasgow phenomenon. While they have shown signs of being able to tackle their geographical localisation, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the sudden, and apparently effortless, success of the alternative SLP grouping owed a good deal to the continuing perception that Sheridan and Co. are still, at heart, a Glasgow corporation. Large numbers of voters in the South and East apparently wanted to vote socialist, but many of them preferred not to vote Glasgow socialist. With Sheridan in Parliament, this problem may become easier to deal with, but it will take a succession of good by-election performances, and considerably better organisation around Edinburgh, to make it go away.

The SSP is still a young organisation, politically it is a fluid one, and its origins in the old Militant group are increasingly remote. In many ways it is a quite different grouping from the one which left the Labour Party under duress in the early 1990s. It may still be overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the task that lies ahead of it, but if not, then the SSP has every chance of forming the core of a growing socialist presence at the polls.

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May 1999