

## **OPINION POLLS IN SCOTLAND: JULY 2001-OCTOBER 2002**

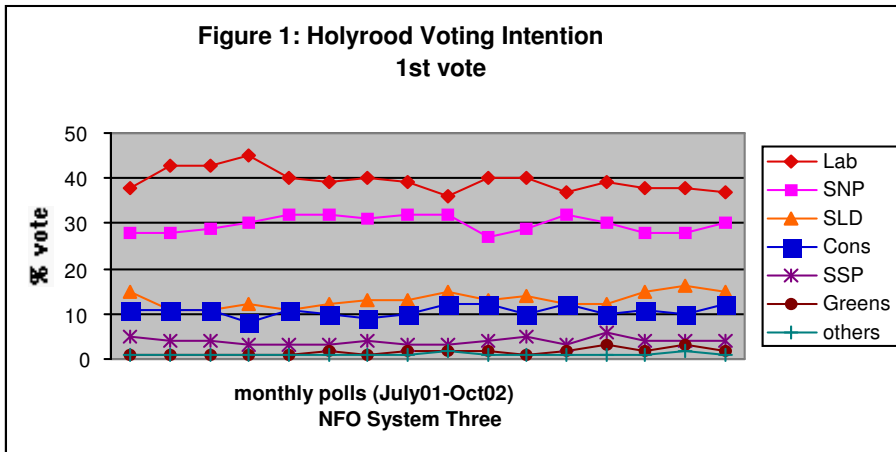
*David McCrone*

The period was a relatively quiet time in Scottish politics, following the UK general election of June 2001, and the upcoming Scottish parliamentary election in May 2003. This was reflected in the paucity of opinion polls. **The Scotsman** carried only one – following September 11th, and is no longer, at least for the moment, investing in polls of Scottish public opinion. We continue, therefore, to rely on the NFO System Three monthly polls carried out for **The Herald**.

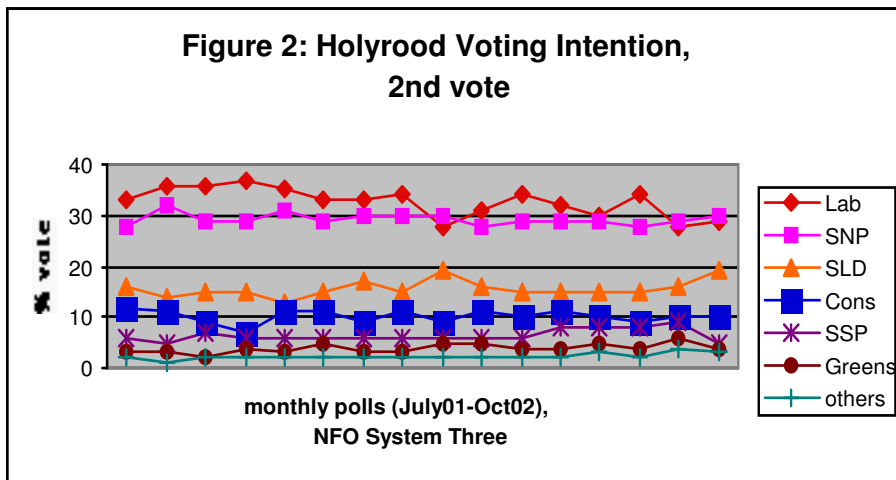
In truth, there has been relatively little shift on Scottish opinion over the last 18 months or so, as Figures 1 and 2 show. As regards votes for Holyrood, Labour was averaging 39% for the constituency vote, virtually what it took at the 1999 election, and 30% for the list vote, and so its vote was holding up well, despite the Henry McLeish debacle in the autumn of 2001. Its main challenger, the SNP maintained its vote shares with 30% and 29% respectively, but must have been disappointed not to run Labour closer. The Nationalists did best during the autumn/winter of 2001, running their deficit from Labour into single figures on the constituency vote, and overtaking them at the March 2002 poll. In autumn 2002, the contest for the list vote was virtually neck-and-neck, while Labour maintained its lead in the constituency vote. The overall effect of these polls is marginal in terms of seats. Labour would probably lose one seat, and the SNP would gain one.

The winners seem likely to be the Liberal Democrats who, despite predictions that coalition with Labour would squeeze their vote, are the main beneficiaries in party support. The polls suggest that they maintain their mid-teen support for the constituencies, and marginally higher for the list vote. On

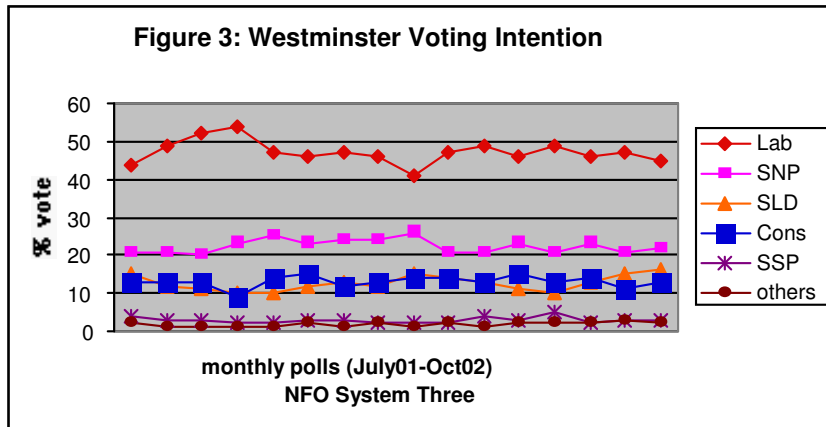
the latest reckoning, they might hope to add six seats to their current total of



17.



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The losers appear to be the Conservatives, who have had a longstanding gripe that NFO System Three polls underestimate their support, although their performance at the actual (UK) election of 2001 somewhat belied these claims. The Tories have been struggling to maintain double figures in the polls for both constituency and list votes, and while one might expect them to recover before May 2003, they appear to be hard pressed to regain the 19 they currently hold. The Scottish Socialist Party, on the other hand, has been winning 4 or 5% in the constituency vote in the polls, and marginally more in the list, indicating that it might win up to four seats if it manages to hold its share. On current showing, the Greens would hold their Lothians list seat, as would Dennis Canavan as an Independent.

The Westminster/Holyrood differential is also a feature of the polls. Labour's average over the period in question is a massive 47% for Westminster compared with 39% in the constituency vote for Holyrood. Likewise, the SNP can manage only 23% as a poll average compared with 30% for Holyrood. This  $\pm 7$  percentage points is settling down to be the Westminster/Holyrood differential between Scotland's two main challengers for power. The Conservatives have a small Westminster 'premium' of around 2 percentage points, while for the Liberal Democrats there is virtual no noticeable effect.

## **A NEW FIRST MINISTER**

NFO System Three also carried two topical sets of questions: the first on Jack McConnell's succession to office in November 2001; and the second on the proposal to cut the number of Scottish Westminster MPs, in March 2002. In terms of the first issue, the bulk of Scottish public opinion was neutral, 61% replying that they had no opinion either way, while 23% said it was good for Scotland, and 15% bad. The majority of Labour supporters were undecided, and it is interesting that SNP supporters were not as hostile to Labour's leader as either Conservative or Liberal Democrat supporters. Mr McConnell's succession was somewhat clouded by disclosures about his private life. Nevertheless, two-thirds of those polled said their judgement of him was unaffected, with 21% thinking it had some negative effect, and 8% a positive one. There were no gender, age or social class differences to speak of, nor, indeed, political ones, though Conservatives were somewhat more hostile, possibly reflecting their age rather than political predilections.

## **CUTTING MSP NUMBERS**

In a March 2002 poll, respondents were asked about their attitude to the proposal to cut the number of Scottish MPs at Westminster from the current 72 to 59. People were asked: "The number of Scottish MPs at Westminster is to be reduced from 72 to 59. Would you support or oppose a similar reduction in the number of MSPs in the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood?" Public opinion was broadly split three-ways: 32% in favour of a reduction; 35% opposed, and 32% with no view on the matter. Those most keen on reducing the number of MSPs at Holyrood were the over 55s (42%); social classes A and B (41%); and men (36%). Young people were far more likely to oppose a reduction than to support it (36% to 23%), while those over 65 were the reverse (26% to 44%). Conservative supporters were in favour of reduction (47% to 30%), and their party was the only one to support cutting the number of MSPs as a matter of policy.

## **SEPTEMBER 11TH**

The only published polling done for **The Scotsman** newspaper was one week after the bombing of the World Trade Center and The Pentagon. Around two-thirds said that they would support military action by the USA in retaliation for the attacks, with 18% opposed, and 15% saying they had no opinion. Men (76%) were far more likely than women (58%) to support military action.

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There was no clear age gradient, although the age group most likely to support action were 35-44 year olds (72%), whereas the youngest (62%) and the oldest (56%) were less supportive. The sample size, however, of this ICM poll was just over 500, and carries a higher probability of sampling error. Consequently, one should interpret such variations with caution. There were no significant party differences in attitudes, with Labour (73%) and Conservative supporters (72%) marginally more supportive. When the possibility of civilians being killed as a result was introduced into the question, opinion was more balanced: 40% in favour, and 45% opposed to military action. Once, more women were more likely to oppose war than men. There was broad support (63% to 26%) for a ground invasion of Afghanistan to root out 'terrorists like Osama Bin Laden'. Tony Blair was thought to have handled the crisis well or very well by 87%, with only 9% being critical. However, there was far less confidence in the ability of George W. Bush to lead a coalition of countries into military action, with 53% confident, and 41% not confident. Older people in particular were less confident (56% to 32%). Respondents were also asked about the use of British and Scottish troops in any action, and whether the Scottish Executive should have a say in their deployment. Despite the fact that defence and foreign affairs is not a devolved matter, three-quarters thought that the Executive should be consulted about the use of British troops, women more than men, and young people more than the old. Interestingly, far from being a 'Scottish' differential in this matter, Scottish opinion was marginally more supportive of consultation with the Executive over British than Scottish troops. Even SNP supporters take the view that the Executive should be consulted over British troops (84%) compared with Scottish troops (77%). It is hard to interpret this finding beyond observing that the differential deployment of Scottish troops has never been part of the political-military agenda, and hence is entirely a theoretical option.

Finally, the ICM poll in September 2001 carried questions on the two main Scottish party leaders at the time, Henry McLeish and John Swinney. It is interesting that McLeish was getting good poll ratings (54%, to 18% bad) shortly before his fall from grace, a view shared by SNP supporters. John Swinney's rating were less good (39% to 22% bad), even among his own party's supporters (53% to 21%).

## **CONCLUSION**

It has been a relatively quiet period in terms of opinion polling over the last 18 months, but this is likely to change with the upcoming Scottish elections in May 2003. It is somewhat disappointing that **The Scotsman** group of newspapers has invested far less in this period than previously. We continue to be indebted to **The Herald** and **The Scotsman**, and their respective polling companies, NFO System Three, and ICM, for permission to use their polls in **Scottish Affairs**. NFO System Three carried out monthly polls for **The Herald** with sample sizes at or around 1000 cases in around 40 constituencies. ICM's September 2001 poll had a weighted base of 509, and consequently carries a higher probability of sampling error of  $\pm 6$  percentage points.

*November 2003*