

‘THE LAST POST’ FOR FIRST-PAST-THE POST? THE 2003 SCOTTISH COUNCIL ELECTIONS

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The third round of elections for the 32 unitary Scottish local councils established in 1995 took place on May 1st 2003. As in the previous round in 1999, these were held on the same day as the Scottish Parliament elections. Whereas in Wales council elections were postponed in order to avoid a clash with elections for the National Assembly, the Scottish Executive apparently took the view that the inevitable overshadowing of the local elections by the Parliament elections was a price worth paying in order to secure the likely benefit of a higher local turnout than would otherwise be the case. A more cynical view of this decision was taken by author of the independent and critical ‘Scottish Politics’ web site (<http://www.alba.org.uk/home2.html>) which commented as follows:

There is, of course, a hidden agenda. If the last elections are anything to go by, local issues will not be discussed at all and the election will be dominated by nationwide issues. This of course will suit the administrations of certain councils who would prefer to be re-elected without any public discussion of the way they have been running local services.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the decision to hold the two elections together – which meant that electors had to vote for a constituency member of the Scottish Parliament, for a regional party list and for a local councillor all within the space of a few moments – there is no doubt that the local elections were overshadowed, barely rating a mention in the Scottish national press or on television during the campaign period. The local elections held in England on the same day were seen as a major test of the current popularity of the parties and the results were pored over and their significance argued about by politicians and pundits. In Scotland, however, the focus of almost all post-election comment was on the Parliament elections. This is a pity, since it remains the case that Scottish council elections are important in their own right. Among other features, they determine control of local authorities – which can affect how well services are delivered and the local policies pursued – and are central to the health of local democracy.

We provide here, therefore, a commentary on the 2003 election results covering, as in previous reports, candidates and contests, turnout, the pattern of party support and the consequences of this for control of local authorities. It is important to note that in order to maintain comparability with previous commentaries the main part of the discussion excludes Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles), Orkney and Shetland which contain very small populations and remain dominated by Independent councillors. A brief note on their elections is provided at the end of the article.

CANDIDATES AND CONTESTS

In the first round of elections for the new authorities in 1995 there were more candidates (3511) for the new councils than there had ever been in a single set of elections under the old two-tier system of Districts and Regions. As Table 1 shows, this total was surpassed in 1999, even though there were slightly fewer seats at stake (due to ward boundary revisions), but in 2003 yet another new record was set, with more than 4,000 candidates contesting the elections. If the health of local democracy is indicated by the willingness of candidates to come forward, then there seems little cause for alarm in Scotland.

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The main reason for the rise in total candidate numbers was the sharp increase in candidates representing the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), a Trotskyist party led by the outspoken and high-profile Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP), Tommy Sheridan. In 1999, the great majority of SSP candidates were in Glasgow (64) and Dundee (14), the remaining 22 being scattered across nine other councils. In 2003, however, as well as contesting 77 of Glasgow's 79 wards, the party had candidates in all but four council areas (Angus, Clackmannanshire, Perth and Kinross and East Renfrewshire), popping up in unlikely places such as Argyll and Bute, Scottish Borders and Moray and having sharply increased numbers in others, such as Edinburgh and North and South Lanarkshire.

Table 1

Number of Candidates in Scottish Council Elections 1995-2003

	1995	1999	2003	Change 99-03
Conservative	586	728	798	+70
Labour	935	968	912	-56
Liberal Democrats	527	596	663	+67
SNP	994	1052	963	-89
SSP	28	100	315	+215
Independents	361	296	391	+95
Others	80	55	29	-26
Total	3,511	3,795	4,071	+276
N of Wards	1,161	1,148	1,148	

Notes: Here and in subsequent tables, figures for the SSP in 1995 refer to Scottish Militant Labour, the forerunner of the SSP. All tables (except Table 11) exclude the three islands councils.

As far as the major parties are concerned, the Conservatives maintained their progress in putting forward candidates with notable increases in Dumfries and Galloway (+18), South Lanarkshire (+17) and Fife (+13). They contested all seats in nine councils (compared with six in 1999) and less than 50% in only seven. The Liberal Democrats also fielded a record number of candidates (+17 in Glasgow, +16 in Angus and +11 in West Lothian) and fought every seat in nine councils (including, somewhat surprisingly, Fife, where they were the only party to do so). There remain significant areas of weakness, however. Across the three Ayrshire councils, the Liberal Democrats could muster only one candidate and they had none in West Dunbartonshire. On the other hand, the numbers of Labour and SNP candidates declined. Labour contested 79.4% of all wards (compared with 84.3% in 1999) and although 100% of seats were contested in 16 councils this was three fewer than in 1999. The biggest declines were in areas where the party is not really in contention, such as Perth and Kinross (-15) and Aberdeenshire (-9) although the drop in Fife (-8) is harder to explain. In terms of candidates, the SNP remained the leading party in 2003 (contesting 83.9% of wards) but their numbers also showed the largest decrease (the comparable figure in 1999 being 91.6%). There was again a large drop in Fife (-18) while Aberdeenshire, Dumfries and Galloway, and Highland each had 11 fewer candidates than in 1999. Whereas in the latter election the SNP contested all wards in 22 councils, this figure fell to 15 councils in 2003.

It is relatively easy to understand the rise in the number of Conservative and Liberal Democrat candidates – put simply, both had plenty of ground to make up – but less easy to explain the decline in Labour and SNP candidates. It may be that these parties experienced difficulties in recruiting candidates and that the fall in their nominations was an early warning of their decline in popularity among the electorate. On the other hand, parties' resources are stretched at the best of times and it may be that because the two leading parties in Scotland were heavily committed to the Scottish Parliament elections they were unable to sustain previous efforts at local level.

The data in Table 1 point to an additional surprising feature of the 2003 local elections. The long, slow decline of Independents, evident since 1974, was abruptly reversed as the number of such candidates increased by almost 100. The 391 Independents contested 315 wards (the numbers being different

because Independents oppose one another in some places) representing 27.4% of wards as compared with 20.9% in 1999. This was not simply due to a resurgence of activity in areas where local politics has been strongly non-partisan in the past. Indeed, in some of these – Scottish Borders, Dumfries and Galloway and Aberdeenshire – the number of Independent candidates declined further. Rather, there was a general increase involving councils such as Angus (+15), Fife (+14), Edinburgh (+8), East Renfrewshire (+5) and others. Across the 29 councils, there was an increase in the number of Independent candidates between 1999 and 2003 in 21. This may reflect in a small way what might be interpreted as a sort of mini-revolt against the established parties which was also evident in the Scottish Parliament elections.

The proportion of wards in mainland councils that went uncontested (2.5%) reached a new low in 2003. Of the 29 wards concerned, 20 were in the Highland council area but no other council had more than 3 uncontested wards. In this respect Scottish local elections have been transformed over the past 25 years. In 1980 more than a quarter (26.0%) of District council wards were uncontested but that figure has fallen very steadily so that today uncontested wards are rare. This is another indication that local democracy is in a relatively robust condition.

TURNOUT

The most important measure of the health of local democracy, however, is usually thought to be the turnout of electors. That there are rising numbers of candidates and contests shows that the parties are interested but are the voters? Since the last two rounds of local elections have coincided with Scottish Parliament elections this is a difficult question to answer. Table 2 compares overall turnout in contested wards in the council elections with turnout in the Scottish Parliament elections in 1999 and 2003. In both cases the turnout in the two elections is very similar. It would seem that only a tiny proportion of the electorate turn up at the polls to vote in the Parliament election but cannot be bothered to vote in the local election. What is unknowable, of course, is what the turnout would have been if only local elections were taking place. Whether local turnout would have been dramatically worse and whether, in that respect, conflating the two sets of elections paid off must remain matters of speculation.

Table 2

Turnout in Scottish Parliament and Council Elections 1999-2003

Scottish Parliament	Council Elections	Scottish Parliament	Council Elections
1999	1999	2003	2003
%	%	%	%
58.8	58.1	49.4	49.1

Note: Rejected ballots are not included in the calculations of turnout.

Variations in local election turnout across councils and wards were, therefore, largely by-products of differential turnout in the Scottish Parliament elections. In other words, local election turnout had little to do with local politics but was affected by matters specific to the Parliament elections – such as constituency marginality – and by the contextual variables which are regularly associated with variations in turnout such as the social composition of the population in the area concerned.

These latter factors tend to make variations in turnout across local authorities relatively predictable and this is illustrated by the fact that the correlation coefficient measuring the strength of the association between turnout at the 1999 local elections and local turnout in 2003 across the 29 council areas was 0.89. This indicates a very strong relationship – councils which had higher turnouts in 1999 also had higher turnouts in 2003; those where turnout was lower in 1999 were also towards the bottom end in 2003. In both elections the lowest turnout in mainland Scotland was in Glasgow and the highest in East Renfrewshire.

At ward-level, the range of turnouts was very large. As in 1999, the ward which recorded the highest turnout (70.2%) was Fairmilehead in Edinburgh but it was 65% or more in 14 wards. At the other extreme, turnout was below 30% in seven wards, all of them in Glasgow, including Merchant City which had the lowest turnout of all (28.1%). The general pattern of turnout across wards was very similar to that in 1999 – the correlation coefficient in this case is +0.891 (N = 1097). Table 3 shows first the mean turnout in wards won by each of the parties. Turnout was clearly highest in Conservative wards and lowest in Labour wards with the others falling somewhere between. Party, here, is a kind of shorthand surrogate for a cluster of socioeconomic characteristics associated with party support and we can interpret the figures as demonstrating turnout was highest in more middle-class, affluent, suburban areas and lower in more working class, poorer areas. This, of course, is nothing new. Table 3 also shows how turnout changed from 1999 in these groups of wards and in this case there was very little difference between the different types of ward. Turnout, the data suggest, declined by about the same amount across the board.

PATTERNS OF PARTY SUPPORT

Insofar as they pay attention to local elections, what most concerns the media and the general public is the performances of the parties, especially the numbers of seats won and lost. We begin this section, however, by looking at the shares of votes received by the parties. Table 4 compares the overall distribution of party support in 2003 with the two previous sets of elections under the current local government structure.

Table 3

Variations in Ward Turnout 2003 and Changes 1999-2003

	Wards won by				
	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	Ind
	%	%	%	%	%
Mean turnout	56.8	47.2	52.1	49.6	53.3
Mean change in turnout 99-03	-9.1	-9.5	-9.0	-9.3	-8.3
(N)	(120)	(503)	(164)	(178)	(151)

Table 4

Share of Votes in Local Elections 1995-2003

	1995	1999	2003	Change 99-03
	%	%	%	
Con	11.3	13.7	15.2	+1.5
Lab	43.8	36.6	32.9	-3.7
Lib Dem	9.7	12.7	14.6	+1.9
SNP	26.2	28.9	24.3	-4.6
SSP	0.6	0.9	3.4	+2.5
Ind	7.6	6.5	9.5	+3.0
Others	0.9	0.8	0.2	-0.6

The Conservatives reached an all-time low in Scotland in 1995 but since then have staged a mini-recovery, which by 2003 saw them back above 15% of the votes cast. This is still poor for a party that in living memory could run Labour close in Scotland, but at least the Conservatives appear to be

moving in the right direction, if rather slowly. The Liberal Democrats are also on an upward track and are now almost level with the Conservatives in terms of popular support at local elections. On the other hand, the SNP suffered a clear setback in 2003 in what was a disappointing set of elections for the party. Labour's vote share also fell and, at less than a third, represented the worst Labour performance in local elections since 1977. In contrast, the SSP registered a measurable impact for the first time and, as previously mentioned, there was a clear reversal of fortune for Independent candidates.

Table 5
Shares of Votes in Wards Contested by Same Parties 1999-2003

	1999	2003	Change
	%	%	%
All four parties (N = 277)			
Conservative	20.6	21.3	+0.7
Labour	32.6	28.2	-4.4
Lib Dem	21.4	25.1	+3.7
SNP	24.1	20.6	-3.5
Others	1.3	4.8	+3.5
Con v Lab v SNP (N = 147)			
Conservative	18.5	19.8	+1.3
Labour	47.0	45.9	-1.1
SNP	32.1	27.9	-4.2
Others	2.4	6.4	+4.0

We have already seen, however, that there were significant changes in the numbers of candidates put forward by the parties and variations in candidatures clearly affect the level of support that the parties obtain – if there is no party candidate in a ward, no votes for the party can be cast. Thus the ‘raw’ figures shown in Table 4 may be misleading to some extent as indicators of trends in party support. To get a more accurate picture, we can compare 1999 and 2003 results in wards contested by the same parties on both occasions. Table 5 shows figures for wards contested by all four parties and for those contested by the Conservatives, Labour and SNP. In each case the general trends shown for the major parties by the overall figures are confirmed, although the improvement in the popularity of the Conservatives is even more modest than Table 4 suggests, once their increased number of candidates is discounted. It is interesting to note also that in wards contested by all four major parties the SNP slipped from second to fourth place. Similar analysis confirms that the advance of the SSP was not simply an artefact of the party's increased number of candidates. In the 87 wards contested in both 1999 and 2003, the SSP's share of the vote rose from 8.2% to 14.6%.

Further details of the pattern of party support in 2003 are given in Table 6 which shows the distribution of votes within individual authorities. Despite an increased number of candidates and a gentle rise in overall support, the Conservatives remain very weak across a large number of councils. They exceeded 30% of votes in only three (South Ayrshire, East Renfrewshire and Dumfries and Galloway) while failing to reach 10% of the vote in ten. In two councils (Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire) they polled fewer votes than the SSP. In contrast, despite an overall decline Labour is weak only in rural and peripheral areas and remains the dominant party in the central belt, having most votes in 15 of the 20 councils in that area. Significant cracks in the Labour monolith appeared in 2003, however. The party was beaten into second place in Aberdeen by the Liberal Democrats, tied with the SNP in Dundee and, perhaps most surprising of all, was trounced by the Liberal Democrats in Inverclyde. Support for the Liberal Democrats themselves is highly variable. In some areas they are an irrelevance. They had no

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	SSP	Ind	Other
Aberdeen	15.3	24.2	35.4	22.9	1.7	0.5	0.1
Aberdeenshire	21.0	3.3	33.5	27.6	0.2	14.5	0.0
Angus	12.3	14.6	13.8	40.4	0.0	18.9	0.0
Argyll and Bute	13.2	2.7	14.3	17.0	1.2	51.5	0.0
Clackmannanshire	5.8	44.2	2.0	41.4	0.0	6.6	0.0
Dumfries & Galloway	30.1	24.1	9.7	14.0	0.7	21.4	0.0
Dundee	14.9	34.1	10.0	34.1	3.5	3.5	0.0
East Ayrshire	12.5	49.2	0.0	35.3	1.3	1.6	0.2
East Dunbartonshire	19.7	29.6	34.2	11.3	2.5	2.6	0.0
East Lothian	23.1	40.6	14.9	19.2	1.6	0.6	0.0
East Renfrewshire	30.7	31.9	20.7	7.7	0.0	8.6	0.5
Edinburgh	24.5	27.4	26.9	15.6	4.2	1.2	0.2
Falkirk	7.0	40.9	1.9	34.2	1.5	14.6	0.0
Fife	10.3	33.3	25.2	20.8	1.5	8.3	0.6

continued

<i>Table 6 continued</i>	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	SSP	Ind	Other
Glasgow	7.6	47.6	7.6	20.5	15.6	0.6	0.6
Highland	1.2	11.6	6.1	10.2	1.1	69.6	0.2
Inverclyde	6.1	31.3	42.6	15.3	1.7	3.0	0.0
Midlothian	11.0	43.3	16.9	24.4	1.4	2.0	0.9
Moray	4.3	12.7	7.9	25.2	0.6	49.3	0.0
North Ayrshire	19.1	44.0	0.4	28.2	2.4	5.5	0.5
North Lanarkshire	3.9	55.2	1.1	32.6	2.5	4.6	0.1
Perthshire and Kinross	28.5	9.8	22.0	35.8	0.0	3.9	0.0
Renfrewshire	8.9	36.8	9.7	39.3	4.7	0.6	0.0
Scottish Borders	28.5	1.4	24.5	11.5	1.9	32.2	0.0
South Ayrshire	41.5	36.7	0.0	17.3	1.3	2.9	0.2
South Lanarkshire	12.5	48.0	4.6	29.2	2.3	3.1	0.2
Stirling	27.7	36.2	12.9	21.3	0.2	1.6	0.0
West Dunbartonshire	3.0	46.8	0.0	33.6	10.1	6.5	0.0
West Lothian	9.2	43.5	7.0	36.3	1.4	2.5	0.0

candidates and therefore no votes in three councils and had less than 10% of the votes in another eleven. On the other hand, they were the leading party in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, East Dunbartonshire and Inverclyde and came second in Edinburgh and Fife. The SNP has rather more consistent support across Scotland – only in East Renfrewshire and Scottish Borders could they be considered an irrelevance – but won most votes in only three councils – Angus, Perth and Kinross and Renfrewshire. Finally, it is worth noting the cross-council variations in support for the SSP. The SSP's largest share of the vote was in Glasgow (15.6%) but it also reached double figures in West Dunbartonshire (10.1%). In many other councils, however, the party barely registered.

Table 6
Party Shares of Votes (%) in Local Authorities 2003

Despite changes in the level of support for the parties from 1999 to 2003, the relative strength of the parties across authorities was very similar in both sets of elections. Correlating the parties' vote shares at council level in 1999 and 2003 gives coefficients of 0.918 for the Conservatives, 0.985 for Labour, 0.961 for the Liberal Democrats and 0.952 for the SNP. These indicate very strong relationships and show that there was strong continuity in the geography of party support.

The impact of the SSP was one of the key questions arising from both the council and Scottish Parliament elections in 2003. Did the SSP do more harm to Labour or the SNP? Analysing ward results

can shed some light on this issue and Table 7 presents some relevant data. Taking the 277 wards which all four major parties contested in both 1999 and 2003 we can split them according to whether or not there was also an SSP candidate in 2003 and compare changes in the shares of vote obtained.

Table 7
Changes in Shares of Votes in Wards Contested by All Four Major Parties 1999-2003

	No SSP Candidate in 2003	SSP Candidate in 2003
Conservative	+1.5	-0.1
Labour	-3.0	-5.6
Liberal Democrats	+4.9	+2.6
SNP	-1.6	-5.3
SSP	0.0	+7.3
(N)	(172)	(105)

Unsurprisingly, the presence or otherwise of an SSP candidate in 2003 appears to have had little effect on Conservative support. The Liberal Democrats improved in both cases but not by as much where there was an SSP candidate. This suggests that that where there was no SSP candidate the Liberal Democrats may have benefited from an anti Labour/SNP vote some of which would otherwise have gone to the SSP. Labour declined more where there was an SSP candidate than in wards not contested by the SSP but it is the SNP that appears to have suffered most from the success of the SSP. The SNP's vote share dropped by 1.6 points where there was no SSP candidate but by 5.3 points where there was one. The conclusion suggested by this simple analysis is confirmed if we correlate change in SSP share of the vote with change in the share obtained by the major parties in the 277 wards contested by all four in both 1999 and 2003. For the Liberal Democrats and Labour the coefficients obtained are statistically significant at -0.112 and -0.165 respectively, indicating that their losses were related to SSP gains. For the SNP, however, the coefficient is -0.338 , which indicates a considerably stronger and more significant relationship. It was the SNP, therefore, that suffered most from the SSP's incursion into the elections. The same conclusion follows if the correlation analysis is repeated for wards contested by the Conservatives, Labour and SNP in both elections.

COUNCIL SEATS WON

To many people, what matters most in local elections is winning seats. That, rather than ups and downs in the shares of the votes, is what determines who controls the local council and acquires the powers that accrue from such control. Table 8 shows the total number of seats won by each of the parties in the three elections since 1995. Despite a significant fall in voting support, Labour retains the lion's share of Scottish council seats although the party has more than 100 fewer councillors than it had in 1995, when it was in opposition at Westminster. The SNP also fell back but the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats made advances, as did Independents. The SSP gained a second councillor (in a straight fight with the SNP in West Dunbartonshire).

The turnover of seats between 1999 and 2003 in mainland councils is shown in Table 9. The great majority of seats, of course, did not change hands but there was, nonetheless, considerable turnover. The Conservative lost 12 wards to the Liberal Democrats but made 27 gains, including 12 from Independents. Labour gained 25 wards, mainly from the SNP, but lost 65, while Liberal Democrat gains (44) – mainly at the expense of the Conservatives and Labour – were precisely double their losses, most of which were to Independents. The SNP made some gains from Labour but lost 19 wards to Labour and 17 to Independents. Independents themselves made significant net gains from Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP but, interestingly, made none from, and lost 12 to, the Conservatives.

Table 8**Council Seats Won in Local Elections 1995-2000**

	1995		1999		2003	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Con	82	7.1	108	9.4	123	10.7
Lab	614	52.9	545	47.5	505	44.0
Lib Dem	121	10.4	148	12.9	170	14.8
SNP	181	15.6	201	17.5	178	15.5
SSP	0		1	0.1	2	0.2
Ind	154	13.3	135	11.8	169	14.7
Others	7	0.6	10	0.9	1	0.1
Total	1161		1148		1148	

At council level the greatest instability was seen in Scottish Borders where 20 of the 34 wards changed hands but over 30% of wards changed in Aberdeen, Dundee and Inverclyde. At the other extreme, no wards changed hands in Renfrewshire, only 2 of 70 in North Lanarkshire and 3 of 79 in Glasgow. Looking at the fortunes of the major parties across the councils, the Conservatives did best in Scottish Borders (9 gains) and Aberdeenshire (5 gains and 1 loss). A bright spot for Labour was East Ayrshire (7 gains and 1 loss) but they had net losses of 8 in Aberdeen, 7 in Fife, 5 in Inverclyde and 4 in both North Ayrshire and Dundee. The Liberal Democrats had a net loss of 6 in Scottish Borders but a net gain of 8 in Aberdeen and 5 in Inverclyde. Aberdeen was good for the SNP with 3 gains and no losses but 7 wards were lost (and one gained) in East Ayrshire, 5 in Aberdeenshire and 4 in both Angus and West Dunbartonshire.

The number of seats won in individual local authorities in 2003 is shown in Table 10. As the figures show, Labour won overall majorities in 13 councils (Clackmannanshire, East Ayrshire, East Lothian, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Midlothian, North Ayrshire, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire, Stirling, West Dunbartonshire and West Lothian). In addition, the party took control of South Ayrshire, where there was a dead heat with the Conservatives, after cutting cards. The SNP retained control of Angus while the Liberal Democrats gained outright control of a unitary council for the first time when they ousted Labour in Inverclyde. Independents remained in charge of three councils – Argyll and Bute, Highland and Moray. In the remaining ten mainland councils no single party or group had overall control after the 2003 elections. In these, Labour was the largest party in Dumfries and Galloway, East Renfrewshire, Falkirk and Fife; the Liberal Democrats in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and East Dunbartonshire; the SNP in Dundee and Perthshire and Kinross and Independents in Scottish Borders. Although they came very close in South Ayrshire on this occasion, the Conservatives have yet to win control of a Scottish unitary council.

Table 9**Gains and Losses of Seats 1999-2003**

Winner 2003	Winner 1999							Gains
	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	SSP	Ind	Other	
Con	96	6	5	4	-	12	-	27
Lab	-	480	4	19	-	2	-	25
Lib Dem	12	21	126	5	-	5	1	44
SNP	-	20	-	156	-	2	-	22

SSP	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	1
Ind	-	17	13	17	-	113	9	56
Other	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Losses	12	65	22	45	0	23	10	

Table 10
Council Seats Won in Local Authorities 2003

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	Ind	Other
Aberdeen	3	14	20	6	0	0
Aberdeenshire	11	0	28	18	11	0
Angus	2	1	3	17	6	0
Argyll and Bute	3	0	8	3	22	0
Clackmannanshire	1	10	0	6	1	0
Dumfries & Galloway	11	14	5	5	12	0
Dundee	5	10	2	11	1	0
East Ayrshire	1	23	0	8	0	0
East Dunbartonshire	3	9	12	0	0	0
East Lothian	4	17	1	1	0	0
East Renfrewshire	7	8	3	0	2	0
Edinburgh	13	30	15	0	0	0
Falkirk	2	14	0	9	7	0
Fife	2	36	23	11	5	1
<i>continued</i>						
<i>Table 10 continued</i>	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	Ind	Other
Glasgow	1	71	3	3	0	1
Highland	0	8	9	6	57	0
Inverclyde	0	6	13	0	1	0
Midlothian	0	15	2	0	1	0
Moray	1	5	1	3	16	0
North Ayrshire	4	21	0	3	2	0
North Lanarkshire	0	54	0	13	3	0
Perthshire and Kinross	10	5	9	15	2	0
Renfrewshire	1	21	3	15	0	0
Scottish Borders	10	0	8	1	15	0
South Ayrshire	15	15	0	0	0	0
South Lanarkshire	2	51	2	9	3	0
Stirling	10	12	0	0	0	0
West Dunbartonshire	0	17	0	3	1	1
West Lothian	1	18	0	12	1	0

Labour's domination of local government in Scotland is much less complete than it used to be. Despite a generally weaker performance, the party gained control of two councils – Clackmannanshire and Stirling (both from no overall control) but two major authorities were lost to no overall control (Aberdeen and Fife), and another to the Liberal Democrats (Inverclyde). Labour now controls 14 councils containing about 55% of the Scottish electorate but there are now 11 councils, with about 33% of the total electorate, which are not under the control of a single party or group. For a significant minority of authorities and of electors, therefore, 'hung' councils, with their attendant problems and opportunities, have become a normal state of affairs.

CONCLUSION

Since 1974, all Scottish local elections have been fought on the basis of the single-member, simple plurality electoral system, more commonly known as first-past-the-post (FPTP). In translating votes into seats this system routinely exaggerates the lead of the largest party and punishes smaller parties. In Midlothian in 2003, for example, Labour won 15 of the 18 seats with just 43.3% of the votes while the SNP and Conservatives won no seats despite taking 24.4% and 11.0% of the votes respectively. Similarly, in Glasgow Labour won 71 of 79 seats with 47.6% of votes while the remaining 8 seats were shared between the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, SNP and SSP who together had 51.3% of the votes.

This situation now looks set to change and the 2003 elections could be the last to be held using FPTP. Following the Scottish Parliament elections in May 2003, the leaders of the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties in Scotland published a 'Partnership Agreement' that set out the policies to be pursued by the Scottish Executive over the next four years. The Agreement included the following as a 'high level commitment':

We will renew local democracy by:

introducing for the next local government elections the proportional Single Transferable Vote system of election. The multi-member wards would have either 3 or 4 members, depending on local circumstances.

Despite misgivings among many Labour politicians, this appeared to be the price exacted by the Liberal Democrats for continuing the coalition arrangement with Labour in the Scottish Executive, and in August 2003 a draft Bill was published giving effect to this pledge.

The road from draft bill to enacted legislation is a rocky one, of course, but there is every chance that the next local elections in 2007 will see councils elected by the single transferable vote system. The consequences of such a change would be far reaching. It would also be an act of remarkable political selflessness. If we compare seats actually won in the mainland councils in 2003 with the seats that would have been won in each authority if the system were broadly proportional, then both the coalition parties would be losers. Labour would have won 152 fewer seats and the Liberal Democrats 10 fewer. Independents would also have declined (by 14). The Conservatives, on the other hand, would have won 48 more seats, the SSP 25 more and the SNP 103 more. Only one council (North Lanarkshire) would have a single party (Labour) in overall control. It is little wonder that the introduction of proportional representation at local level is bitterly opposed by some leading Labour councillors.

It may be that the introduction of a proportional system would, as proponents suggest, blow a breath of fresh air through the musty corridors of Scottish local government. It would certainly dramatically reduce the number of one-party 'statelets' where Labour has monopolised power for generations. If the local elections are held on the same day as the next Parliament elections in 2007, however, the task facing voters (and Returning Officers) will be even more complex than it was in 1999 and 2003. We tend to the view taken by the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Politics website mentioned above – that it would be better to separate the two sets of elections. Although it might result in lower local turnouts, this would probably result in more publicity in the media for the local contests and, more importantly, allow local elections to fulfil more clearly their primary function – providing the mechanism whereby local voters can pass judgement upon the quality of their local representatives and hold their local administration accountable.

A NOTE ON THE ISLANDS COUNCILS

Between 1974 and 1995 there was a two-tier structure of local government in mainland Scotland – Regions and Districts. The special circumstances of the Northern and Western Isles meant that such a structure was not appropriate, however, and three unitary Islands Councils – Orkney, Shetland and Western Isles – were created. Since these were already in place, there was no need for special elections to be held in 1995 when the new mainland unitary authorities were first elected. In 1999 and 2002 the islands re-integrated into the normal election cycle and table 11 provides a summary of the results.

Table 11

Elections for Islands Councils 1999 and 2003						
	1999			2003		
Electorate	55,087			52,837		
Wards	74			74		
% wards contested	60.8			56.8		
% turnout	62.9			59.5		
	Cands	% Votes	Seats	Cands	% Votes	Seats
Con	0	0.0	0	0	0.0	0
Lab	12	6.1	6	8	6.3	4
Lib Dem	11	7.2	8	13	7.7	5
SNP	5	5.3	3	6	5.3	3
Ind	108	79.9	56	97	80.7	62
Others	3	0.0	1	0	0.0	0

From their inception, the Islands councils have been dominated by Independents and this has continued in the latest election. As before, Independents comprised the vast majority of candidates in 2003, took 80% of the votes and more than 80% of the seats. There were no party candidates at all in Orkney, but the Liberal Democrats made a showing in Shetland with 13 candidates. The 8 Labour and 6 SNP candidates were all in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. Typical of areas in which non-partisan local politics is the rule, a large proportion (43%) of wards went uncontested in the islands. Even in the few mainland councils where Independents predominate, parties nonetheless play a significant part in elections. This is less true of the islands which remain bastions of non-partisan local politics.

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