

3 MAY ELECTIONS BRIEFING

INTRODUCTION

The forthcoming local council elections, and the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections, will mark the biggest test of political opinion, and electoral standing, since the last General Election.

Labour is bracing itself for heavy losses in the council elections and is campaigning hard to cling on to power in Holyrood and Cardiff, where polls point to new coalition arrangements. Regardless of events, Tony Blair is expected to announce his resignation following the elections. Gordon Brown will be anxious about the voters verdict, which will indicate the scale of the task that confronts him to rebuild Labour support. Conservative Leader, David Cameron, will also be under pressure to show that his Party has made the necessary progress for it to become a Government in waiting. Not only will the Tories have to make further impressive gains in southern England, but also show they are making the necessary progress in the north of England where the Conservative Party has a distinctive dearth of councillors. Menzies Campbell, Leader of the Liberal Democrats, will also have a point to prove after disappointing results last year. If the Liberal Democrats lose out to the Tories, and fail to make significant gains from Labour, Campbell's future as party leader could again be in doubt. Of the minor parties, the Green Party, UKIP and the BNP are all fielding more candidates than ever before and will be hoping to make electoral in-roads.

This briefing overviews the electoral battlegrounds. For more information contact: politics@connectpa.co.uk

ENGLISH LOCAL ELECTIONS

On May 3rd there will be 10,500 council seats contested across 312 local authorities in England. Across all 36 of the metropolitan boroughs, one-third of council seats will be contested. In 25 unitary authorities the whole council will go to the polls, while in another 20 a third of seats are up for election. Of district councils, 153 will elect the entire council, another 78 will elect a third.

Labour: Damage limitation

Commentators are predicting the Labour Party will lose around 600 of its council seats, with losses particularly prevalent in the south east, the home counties and the West Country. This result would leave Labour with around 5,500 councillors, its worst position for 35 years.

Colin Rallings, Professor of politics at the University of Plymouth has predicted that Labour will only manage to poll 24% of the vote. The one consolation for Labour is that the loss of a large number of councillors, may only translate into a loss of control of around 15 authorities, however it is expected that the Party will lose important southern strongholds such as Plymouth, Brighton and Hove and Gravesham.

Conservative Party: Hopeful of gains

The Conservatives are hoping to make a number of gains, with the aim being to attain over 40% of the vote, the threshold David Cameron must reach in order to have any chance of winning a general election. The Conservatives are expected to gain large number of councillors in the south and south-east, strengthening existing strongholds. Their problem will be gaining councillors in northern England, the Party has no councillors in Newcastle, Manchester or Liverpool. In 2006 the Party only gained one councillor in the whole of the north-east. Therefore this election will be the first test of David Cameron's Northern Board, set up in January to boost the Tories' dwindling fortunes in the region. However, Shadow Local Government Minister Eric Pickles has said that the Party will not be basing the Party's success or failure on their performance in the north.

The party will campaign on the Vote Blue, Go Green theme that it adopted last year, pushing environmental and crime issues. Mr Cameron and the Shadow Cabinet team, who will all be deployed during the next four weeks, will also be campaigning on the NHS and against identity cards. The focus will be on local rather than national issues

Liberal Democrats: Fighting on two fronts

The Liberal Democrats, who had the disappointment of making no net gains in last years elections, will be looking to make advances on Labour in the north, in authorities such as Hull, while holding off potential Conservative gains in the south, in authorities such as Bournemouth and Woking. Again these results will be indicative of what is to come in a future general election, as David Cameron must win a large number of Lib Dem controlled Parliamentary seats to have any chance of walking into Number Ten. If the Liberal Democrats have a disappointing night, there is likely to be renewed speculation about Ming Campbell's future as party Leader.

Minority Parties

The big three parties seem to be facing the strongest challenge yet from smaller rivals in England's local elections. The Green Party has said it is fielding 1,400 candidates, UKIP has trebled its number of candidates to 1,000 and the BNP has gone up from 350 to 750.

The British National Party is fielding around 750 candidates in next month's elections, almost double the number who stood for it last year. Jon Cruddas, candidate for the Labour Deputy Leadership and MP for Dagenham, where the BNP won 11 council seats in last year's local elections, has warned that the far-right party was thriving in some poorer areas, positioning itself as an alternative to the main political parties, particularly in former Labour heartlands in the North West and West Yorkshire.

The Green Party has seen a boost in its opinion poll ratings in recent months, as environmental issues climb the political agenda, and they therefore hope to increase their current 93 councillors to 120. The Greens do not control any councils, but last year's local elections saw them gain 20 councillors, including nine in Norwich. They hope to become the second biggest party in Norwich and Brighton this year.

The UK Independence Party are also claiming to be fielding around 1000 candidates in the elections. The Party claims to have gained an average of 10.5% of the vote in the seats it contested at last May's elections, although it only has '15 to 18' councillors across England. The Party has traditionally focused on the issue of the European Unions, but launching its manifesto earlier this month, party leader Nigel Farage said the party wanted to '*slash council tax*' and put power back in the hands of local people.

Changes to election rules

The local elections will also be affected by new laws to tackle election fraud, including the need to provide a signature and date of birth for postal vote applications. This could substantially lower the number of postal votes as people will be forced to re-register this year under the new rules.

One side-effect of the new rules is that as many as half of the local election results may not be announced until the following day, making overnight predictions difficult. The pool of candidates will be younger because 18-year-olds can stand for the first time, and internet, texting and telephone pilots will be held in some councils.

3 MAY ELECTIONS BRIEFING

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

The next general election to the Scottish Parliament will also be held on 3 May 2007. As will the elections for all 32 Scottish councils.

The Scottish Parliament elections will use a voting system called the Additional Member System. This elects a mixture of constituency and regional Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs).

Of the total 129 MSPs, 73 are elected to represent single-member constituencies. Election of an MSP in this case is decided on a 'first-past-the-post' system; the candidate with the highest number of votes being elected. The remaining 56 MSPs are elected to one of eight multi-member regions, chosen by proportional representation. In this case, electors vote for a political party, not directly for an individual. The particular individuals selected come from lists drawn up by the political parties before the election.

At the moment the Scottish Executive is governed by a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition, who hold 67 of the 129 seats (Labour 50, Liberal Democrats 17), the Scottish National Party are the official opposition with 27 seats with the Scottish Conservatives the other significant party on 18.

Labour Party

Scottish Labour leader, and current First Minister, Jack McConnell has announced that he will make Scotland's education system a top policy priority, with plans to rebuild or refurbish a further 250 schools, as part of a wider policy to refurbish all schools in Scotland. Labour plan to introduce men's health MOTs and offer free vaccination against cervical cancer to young women. They would also ban the sale of cigarettes to under 18s. Others plans include adding new top and bottom bands to the council tax system, and setting a target of at least 50% of electricity sourced from renewable energy by 2020.

Scottish National Party (SNP)

The Scottish National Party, led by Alex Salmond, is making the case for Scottish independence from the United Kingdom. They plan to hold a referendum on independence, although they have now said that if they formed an Executive, any referendum would not be held immediately. However, they have pledged to publish a White Paper on the plebiscite within 100 days of taking power.

Other major manifesto pledges include the '*freeing up*' of £1.1bn for reallocation to new national infrastructure projects, providing 50% more free nursery education, and replacing Higher Education Student Loans with grants. They have stated that they would scrap prescription charges and introduce elections to health boards. They also have plans to replace council tax with a local income tax.

Liberal Democrats

The Scottish Liberal Democrats, led by Nicol Stephen, are the junior partners of the current Executive. They have emphasised their plans for young people and renewable energy in their election manifesto. They plan to introduce a free playgroup place for all two-year-olds, and in universities and colleges would abolish the Graduate Endowment and continue to

3 MAY ELECTIONS BRIEFING

oppose the introduction of Top-Up Fees in Scotland. Other plans include setting a target of generating 100% of Scotland's electricity from renewable sources by 2050.

Conservative and Unionist Party

The Conservative and Unionist Party, led by Annabel Goldie, plan to introduce a new Education Act, which they say would extend the powers of headteachers. Other plans include increasing police officer numbers by 1,500, halving council tax for pensioners over 65, and allowing patients to choose which hospital will perform their operation.

The Independence factor?

While the SNP are currently ahead in opinion polls, their support for Scottish independence, is not proving as popular. In a Sunday Times' You Gov poll on 28 March, only 27% of those surveyed supported Scottish independence. This seems to suggest that growing SNP popularity is due to dissatisfaction with the majority Labour Executive.

Tony Blair recently alluded to this recently warning the Scottish electorate not to vote SNP simply to punish the Labour Party saying that Scotland '*would live with the 'consequences' of an SNP government for years to come.*'

However the SNP has won high profile backing from leaders of the business community, including the former Chairman of the Royal Bank of Scotland George Mathewson, and Dan Thomson Chairman of Noble Group, who recently declared in The Herald that, '*the Scottish business community must now get involved. That's why I am...prepared to state openly what so many believe privately- that independence is more of an opportunity than a threat.*'

Whether Scotland eventually does hold a referendum or not, an SNP-led administration could strengthen English nationalist arguments, including proposals for only English MPs being allowed to vote on legislation affecting England.

Will the Liberal Democrats be Kingmakers?

The current predictions from a number of commentators appear to suggest that the Lib-Lab pact will not survive the elections, with the SNP likely to be the largest party after 3 May, this seems to be due to disillusionment with the war in Iraq and a rejection of the 'cash-for-honours' scandal rather than a distinct appetite for independence.

According to the latest YouGov poll in the Sunday Times on 28 March, the SNP had 35% of the constituency vote, 6 points ahead of Labour. The Liberal Democrats were on 14%, closely followed by the Conservatives with a 13% share of the vote.

According to these statistics, the SNP are on track to win 50 seats, seven more than Labour. The Liberal Democrats would have 18 MSPs, the Conservatives 17 and the Greens 1.

Because of the proportional representation element to the election, in the regional 'list' votes, it is unlikely that the any party will gain an overall majority in Holyrood. This would mean that the SNP, if elected as the largest Party in the Parliament, would then have to negotiate to form a coalition. The only likely candidate for such a coalition would be the Liberal Democrats, as both the Conservatives and the Labour Party are fundamentally opposed to an independent Scotland.

3 MAY ELECTIONS BRIEFING

However, it already appears that the negotiations will not be straightforward, the Liberal Democrats have already said they would not support such a coalition if the SNP were to go ahead with their current plans for a referendum. Any coalition would mean that the SNP could be forced to water down their referendum proposals calling instead for further devolutionary powers.

Such requests on the part of the Liberal Democrats would increase the likelihood that the SNP would try to form a minority government rather than lose face over the independence issue. This could allow for a return of the Lib-Lab pact as an alternative Executive. This will greatly depend on how willing Alex Salmond will be to forego his principles in order to gain what would be an historic victory for the SNP and how willing Nicol Stephen would be prepared to negotiate.

SCOTTISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

All 32 Scottish councils are up for election on 3 May.

This will be the first election for local government in mainland Great Britain which will be decided completely on proportional representation, using the Single Transferable Vote (STV). This was part of the negotiations in 1999 when the Liberal Democrats agreed to join Labour in a power sharing agreement for the Executive.

The Scottish system of STV will be based on three or four-member 'multi-member wards' with candidates required to achieve a quota of 25 per cent plus one vote in three-member wards and 20 per cent plus one vote in four-member wards. This will mean that councillors will represent much larger geographical areas, but there will be more of them covering that patch.

In order to avoid splitting the votes, parties have reduced their numbers of candidates, to those likely to be elected. This means that in most three-member wards no party is likely to put forward more than two candidates and most will field only one. Therefore Labour itself is likely to lose a considerable number of councillors and thereby lose control in most of the 13 councils they currently hold, potentially leaving them in complete control of only three. Conversely the SNP, who hold only three Scottish councils at the moment, could end up doubling their number of councillors, and having representatives in every council for the first time.

This shake-up of the council elections has also seen controversy, with the drastic cuts in the numbers of candidates. Long-serving older councillors have been offered 'golden handshakes' of up to £20,000 to retire. This therefore could have the knock-on effect that a large number of the people elected at this election will be first time councillors.

In addition, councillors elected this May will receive salaries for the first time.

3 MAY ELECTIONS BRIEFING

WELSH ASSEMBLY

The elections to the Welsh Assembly are also held on 3 May, 2007. The full Assembly of 60 seats will be contested, 40 elected from single-member constituencies on a first-past the post system, and 20 Assembly Members elected from regional closed lists.

The Welsh Assembly Government is currently a minority Labour administration led by First Minister Rhodri Morgan, who currently commands 29 seats, with the nationalist Plaid Cymru Party and official opposition on 12, the Conservative Party with 11 seats, the Liberal Democrats with 6 seats and two Independent Members.

After May the Assembly will return with more powers under the provisions of the new Government of Wales Act 2006. The Act creates, for the first time, a separate Executive within the Assembly with the ability to draw up certain legislation but only on matters within the Assembly Government's existing areas of responsibility.

MPs will authorise the transfer to the Assembly of powers to make laws, to be known as Assembly Measures. This new procedure, the Government has said, is intended to enable the Assembly to '*achieve its legislative priorities more efficiently.*'

Labour Party

Current First Minister Rhodri Morgan has described Wales under Labour as 'the envy of Britain'.

Shortly before the election the Labour administration announced free prescriptions for all in Wales. Some have argued that this was an attempt by Rhodri Morgan to distance himself from the London Labour Government, while at the same time combating the Conservative and Plaid campaigns on health care.

The key manifesto pledges are again on Health with promises of more hospitals in North Wales and more affordable housing. The First Minister has also pledged to oppose any excessive Council Tax increases.

Plaid Cymru

The Plaid Cymru will be led by Ieuan Wyn Jones. One of the cornerstones of Plaid Cymru's election manifesto pledges is to provide universal, affordable childcare for all children, of the age of three, in Wales; an extension of the present provision for all four year olds.

Further education proposals include one laptop for every 11 year old and they pledge to help to reduce the student debt burden for students who stay in the Principality. Also on the agenda are proposals to abolish 'Right to Buy' and to introduce first home grants which are designed to provide a step onto the property market. The manifesto also includes a pledge to scrap council tax for a local income tax.

Interestingly, unlike the SNP in Scotland, Plaid have downplayed their ambitions for independence in Wales, with the first mention of the word appearing on page 36 of their manifesto. This is most likely due to Plaid fears that they could 'scare off' any potential coalition partner.

3 MAY ELECTIONS BRIEFING

Conservative Party

The Party, led by Nick Bourne, is focusing on NHS cuts and '*an end to the postcode lottery*' in medical care. Also included is a pledge to help pensioners pay Council tax.

Continuing the environmental agenda of the national party set by David Cameron, the Welsh Conservative manifesto includes a heavy emphasis on tackling climate change and creating sustainable communities. More tangible policies in this area include the provision of £20 worth of energy efficient light-bulbs to every household in Wales.

Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrat Party, led by Nick German, promises a '*Fair Green Future*' for Wales, with the environment at the heart of it's manifesto. Also promised are more rights for carers, healthier school meals; and a pledge to provide £150m in extra investment for affordable and social housing. Better use of public transport is also key.

Lib-Lab Pact or Grand Coalition?

The outcome of the elections is very difficult to predict based on the current polls and speculation amongst commentators, and the parties themselves, centres around three possible coalition scenarios:

- For Labour to retain power, the Party would have to seek the support of a partner in coalition. There is speculation that Labour could form some sort of voting agreement with the Nationalists in which they would back key Labour initiatives in return for concessions. This was seen most recently in the Welsh Assembly budget this year, in which Plaid Cymru offered their support in return for concessions
- The second option would be a 'Lib-Lab' pact, which was in place between 2000-03, but collapsed. With this in mind Rhodri Morgan may be reluctant to commit himself as the price could be a demand for proportional representation in local elections, which would endanger Labour seats.
- The third outcome would be a grand coalition of the minority parties. However the stability of such a pact, with nationalists ruling with Conservatives and Liberal Democrats is questionable and potentially unsustainable. However none of these parties has ruled out such an arrangement.

The most likely outcome of the election is that Rhodri Morgan will remain as First Minister, at the head of a party with the highest number of Assembly Members, however it will almost certainly not be enough to form an Executive Government without some form of coalition partner.

Ieuan Wyn Jones, leader of Plaid Cymru has suffered the loss of 5 seats since 1999, however it has been predicted that his party is likely to gain a number of seats and could play a part in some sort of coalition Executive.

The Conservatives have been confident about election success in Wales. Already only one seat behind Plaid in the current arrangements, they are hoping to overtake Plaid as the second party in the Assembly, even with the suggestion of forming a grand coalition with Plaid and the Liberal Democrats to oust Morgan.

3 MAY ELECTIONS BRIEFING

As in Scotland, the Liberal Democrats, although the fourth party, could play the pivotal role in deciding who will form the Executive after May. They will be courted by both Labour and any possible grand coalition formed by the Conservatives and Plaid Cymru, placing them in the ideal position for negotiating on manifesto commitments. Therefore whatever the result on 3 May it is almost certain that the Liberal Democrats will be in Government in Wales on 4 May, with the Liberal Democrat Assembly Leader, Mike German, commenting in the Guardian that *'no single Welsh Lib Dem policy would take priority as a deal breaker in coalition negotiations.'*

Connect Public Affairs will provide full details of the election results, and subsequent announcements on political arrangements in Wales and Scotland and in local authorities.