

Thoughts on an Edinburgh by-election by Gavin Corbett

Guest post by Gavin Corbett

It has been confirmed that the City Centre Ward in Edinburgh will face a council by-election in the next few months, with one of its three members, David Beckett, standing down at the end of June.

The ward was the scene of a very tight contest in the 2007 local elections. Only 3% separated the SNP's 20% of first preference votes and the Greens' 17%. With transfers and vote shifts in the meantime this is arguably Scotland's most marginal 5-way contest.

Even with the by-election happening through Alternative Vote the result could easily go to any of the 5 parties. Of the contenders, the Lib Dems must fancy their chances least, demoralised by national poll ratings, the blow of gaining no MSPs in Lothian in May and by their lamentable reputation in leading the Council Administration in the City. The bookies would give long odds on a Lib Dem victory.

And despite coming narrowly first in 2007 and now also holding the Edinburgh Central Holyrood seat, the SNP cannot feel over-optimistic. Barring death or serious illness voters tend to look unfavourably on an incumbent party resignation which has prompted a by-election. The SNP will try to make the election a referendum on trams but voters know that the SNP has sat in the city chambers alongside the Lib Dems in the Administration that has so ineptly handled the trams project these last four years. City Centre is not the most natural SNP territory and the Alex Salmond factor will not be as strong as in May 2007 or May 2011.

So if one of the Tories, Labour or Greens win that affects the

balance of power in the City Council – depriving the SNP and Lib Dems of a majority via the casting vote of the Lord Provost. That makes the contest all the more intriguing.

Prior to 2007 Labour held most of the council territory that makes up the ward now (the New Town excepted) but lost out in the 2007 poll. Party activists will work hard but will also be disheartened by the Holyrood result earlier this year.

The Tories will feel they have a strong chance with a low turnout typical of a Council by-election helping to amplify the perceived loyal New Town vote. However, the party has really been stalling in Edinburgh the last two years, failing to make gains in 2010 and losing former leader, David McLetchie's seat in the Scottish elections last month.

✘ So that leaves the Greens. As the Green candidate in 2007 (but happy to concentrate elsewhere in the city now) I know that the Greens were a mere handful of votes away from electing their fourth councillor 4 years ago. I know how warm the reception was when I went canvassing. This will be the first by-election in the new multi-member set-up where the party has had a real prospect of winning and I expect that to put a spring in the step of members. A Green win here would turn heads as no other result could.

So it looks like an exciting campaign with plenty to win or lose. One thing on which I hope all parties can agree, though, is timing. It is speculated that the election will be in August at just the time when the world's largest arts event descends on the centre of Edinburgh. Canvassing and leafleting at that time would be fraught. Let's hope for a sensible delay.

This article also appears on the [Edinburgh Greens website](#).