

Letter from Scotland



I counted them in....

There is something magical, almost sacred, about the verdict of the people as expressed through the ballot box. Whatever the predictions, there is that breath-catching moment when the voting papers are poured out on the counting tables and you wait to see if the expectations are confirmed or confounded.

I was privileged to feel that magical moment when I stood in the great hall at Ingliston on Thursday night/Friday morning to watch the Scottish Parliamentary Election. Yes, everyone was predicting an SNP win, in fact I was predicting an SNP majority. It's turned out to be an SNP win but with two seats short of a majority. Then the truly unexpected happened – the Conservatives beat Labour into second place and the Greens put the Liberal Democrats down to the bottom.



So the final tally stands at: SNP 63 seats, Conservatives 31, Labour 24, Greens 6 and the Liberal Democrats 5. The SNP's failure to win an outright majority was due to the often confusing system of proportional representation. The more they won in the constituency race, the less they won in the regional race. Their actual share of the vote in both races (46 per cent and 42 per cent) was nearly double that of any other party.

It means we are back in the business of parliamentary rule rather than party rule. Nicola Sturgeon's SNP government will now have to put together a majority in parliament for each of its policies separately. In my view, this is how it should always be and Alex Salmond showed how it could be done in the SNP's first term in office until 2011.

I always enjoy the geography of an election. The map of Scotland is almost completely SNP yellow, but there are substantial swathes in the south and north-east, coloured blue by the Conservatives. There are spots of Liberal yellow here and there and daubs of Labour red in curious places like East Lothian and Dumbartonshire. The sad story of the night was Labour's continuing fall from grace, tumbling from being the natural ruling party of Scotland to just third place. The SNP, for example, won all eight constituency seats in Glasgow, once the heartland of Labour support.



Elections are also about personalities. And as expected, Nicola Sturgeon has fought a brilliant campaign with the most threadbare of manifestos, a real tribute to her political talent. She offered vision and hope and sheer competence. Scottish Labour's new leader Kezia Dugdale (the seventh since devolution in 2009) appeared school-girlish by comparison. She failed to win her home seat of Edinburgh Eastern and had to rely on the regional list to be returned to Holyrood.



The brash young Conservative leader Ruth Davidson was the Donald Trump of the night, speaking wildly and enjoying every mad photo-opportunity, from playing rugby with young lads to riding a buffalo. Her antics have resulted in a Tory resurgence. Willie Rennie, the Liberal Democrat leader, was another star of the photo-shoot, clambering through children's soft-play mazes, holding eagles aloft on one arm, mucking out a pigsty. And he was rewarded with a fine win in Fife North East and a party rescued from oblivion.



By contrast, the leader of the Greens, Patrick Harvie has played an old-fashioned straight-forward game of policy announcements, solid interviews and debates. And the Greens

have emerged as a party of real influence, with 6 MSPs (including the youngest 21-year old Ross Greer) ready to give or withhold a majority for the SNP.

Which brings us to policy....what the election was supposed to be all about. Taxation was at the heart of it. Labour, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats all advocated increases in tax to "halt Westminster austerity" and reverse the cuts to public services. I thought this might deter people from voting but in fact the turnout, at 55.6 per cent, was up on last time...though still shockingly low. The electorate however were obviously cautious about tax increases, hence the rise of the Conservatives and the SNP's careful avoidance of the issue.

But also at the heart of this election was "independence". The question has not been settled by the referendum 18 months ago. Those who voted "Yes" have permanently transferred their allegiance to the SNP and those who voted "No" are split between the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

So as the SNP set out on their third term of office, their main objective is still on the agenda and if the voters' next trip to the polling stations on 23rd June results in England voting to leave the European Union and Scotland voting to remain (both of which look likely at the moment) that may well trigger an unstoppable opinion poll surge for another independence referendum.

Was there anything else happening in Scotland this week ? Only that the blossom has appeared on the cherry tree outside my kitchen window.



Let a thousand flowers
bloom