

## Apathy the biggest threat to SNP as Labour's warnings fail to dent lead

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- 100 days before polling day sees SNP with clear lead according to poll
- 41 per cent undecided on whether to vote at all
- However, any SNP-Lib Dem coalition would be at odds over independence

### Key quote

"This proves that voters in May face a clear choice: education with Labour or separation with the SNP." - *GEORGE FOULKES, LABOUR*

**Story in full** ALEX Salmond has entered the crucial last 100 days before polling day with a clear lead over Labour, according to an ICM poll for The Scotsman, published today.

The poll shows that Labour's high-profile offensive against independence over the last two months has failed to put any real dent in the SNP vote.

If carried through into May's election, the poll results would give the SNP 44 seats to Labour's 41, with the Liberal Democrats on 23 and the Conservatives on 17.

This would allow Mr Salmond to form an SNP-Lib Dem coalition without needing help from any other parties, and crucially it would leave Labour and the Liberal Democrats one seat short of the number needed to continue their own partnership government.

But there is a message for all the parties in the huge percentage of voters - 41 per cent - undecided as to whether they would vote at all.

The figure suggests that apathy, disillusionment and campaign tactics could play a big part in May.

The poll found that Labour's support had hardened slightly since The Scotsman's last poll in November 2006, going up one percentage point on the constituency vote and two on the regional list vote - not enough to make any real impact on the SNP's lead.

The Nationalists still lead Labour in both votes.

On the constituency vote, the SNP has 33 per cent (down one percentage point on November), Labour is on 31 per cent, the Liberal Democrats on 17 per cent and the Tories 13 per cent (both no change on November). The SSP is on 3 per cent and the others on 3 per cent.

On the regional vote, the SNP increased its share of the vote from November, up two points to 33 per cent, with Labour going up just one point to 27 per cent. The Liberal Democrats were down two points on 17 per cent, while the Conservatives were up two points on 14 per cent.

The Greens recorded 5 per cent of the vote on the regional list, giving them only enough votes for only one seat.

The poll represents a significant setback for Labour, particularly as Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Douglas Alexander have campaigned hard over the last few months to drive home what they claim are the perils of independence.

And although the poll appears to suggest that an SNP-Lib Dem coalition now looks likely, both parties know there is a big barrier standing in the way of that - the SNP's insistence on an independence referendum.

Both parties have set out apparently uncompromising views on the issue but both have also left themselves just enough wriggle room to make a deal, if necessary.

Nobody wants to rule out any option at the moment.

Angus Robertson, the SNP's campaign director, said he was "absolutely delighted" with the poll, saying the SNP had never been in such a consistently strong position this close to an election before.

Labour's campaign vice chairman, George Foulkes chose to concentrate on his party's core message, stating: "This proves that voters in May face a clear choice: education with Labour or separation with the SNP."

### **Lib Dems have more reason to smile than Alex Salmond**

DOUBTLESS Alex Salmond's face is graced by an even bigger smirk than usual this morning. During the nine weeks since our last poll, the Labour party has huffed and it has puffed - but it has still not brought his house down.

But the SNP leader is still a long way from being propelled to power in May.

He is going to need friends, but where should he turn?

At 5 per cent, the Greens are below the vital 6 per cent threshold they need to pass to win seats. Of course no poll can be sure that a party stands at 5 per cent rather than 6 per cent, but our projection does underline the potential precariousness of the Greens' parliamentary perch.

So Mr Salmond is going to have to look elsewhere - the Liberal Democrats.

Arithmetically at least it appears a SNP-Liberal Democrat coalition is a realistic option.

But of course whether the two parties can reach a political accommodation is perhaps the \$64,000 question of this election - and one to which we will not receive an answer, if at all, until after 3 May.

And here comes the hidden bad news for Mr Salmond in our poll. On the basis of our projection not only could the Liberal Democrats strike a deal with the SNP, but they could also do so with Labour. True, Labour and the Liberal Democrats would still be one short of a majority, but doubtless they could entice at least one MSP from the ranks of the independents to help them.

In these circumstances Nicol Stephen, the Liberal Democrat leader, would have a trump card. He could always walk out and talk to the other side.

If Mr Salmond is to have a serious chance of becoming First Minister he has to do more than defeat Labour - he has to stop Labour and the Lib Dems from reaching anything close to 65 seats. And that target could still be beyond his reach.

*JOHN CURTICE*