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Iraq, fishing or GM crops, it's all up to you

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IT'S a referendum on Iraq, a chance to stand up for Scotland's fishing industry or an opportunity to say no to a United States of Europe. When it comes to the European election on Thursday, everyone has a different perspective on what it's really about.

The Scottish Nationalists, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish Socialists are quite blunt. They want people to use their vote to protest against Tony Blair's decision to go to war in Iraq.

The SNP, mindful of its north-east core vote, has also been campaigning hard on the fishing issue. The Tories talk fish too, but are eager to highlight their opposition to the proposed new European constitution, which they say will transfer more power to Brussels.

Labour, meanwhile, has used the election to remind voters of Michael Howard's political past.

The Greens want to capitalise on the anti-war vote too, but say the elections should also be about opposing GM crops, toxic chemicals in the environment and the expansion of nuclear power.

A total of 732 MEPs will be elected when voters go to the polls in the 25 countries which make up the newly-expanded European Union.

But since there is no European government and the parliament's powers are relatively limited, the results will not mean any sudden shift of control or wholesale alteration of policies.

It could, however, lead to significant changes in the mood on issues where the parliament has most influence, such as workers' rights and environmental legislation, as well as affecting the approval of new Commissioners.

The European People's Party - which includes the British Conservatives along with Christian Democrats - is likely to emerge as the biggest party, as it was in the last parliament, with the Socialists - including the UK Labour Party - in second place and the Liberals third, followed by the Green/European Free Alliance, which currently includes the Greens and the SNP. But there has also been talk of groups breaking up and reforming, including the possibility of a new hard-right group.

Scotland currently has eight MEPs - three Labour, two Nationalists, two Tories and one Lib Dem - but will go down to seven, part of the overall UK contingent of 78 MEPs. Scotland is counted as one giant constituency and has been since 1999, so the seven MEPs will all represent the whole of the country.

Labour is most likely to be the party to lose a seat. And if there is no dramatic shift of votes, the others could hang on to their current strength.

Tony Blair has admitted Iraq will damage Labour in the election, but any backlash against the war will not benefit the Tories because they supported the invasion. In Scotland, the Greens, Scottish Socialists, Lib Dems and SNP are all vying for the anti-war vote, which could mean it is dissipated.

And the three biggest parties have all had problems since the campaign began.

Labour's David Martin, Scotland's longest serving Euro MP and vice-president of the European Parliament, has been dogged by allegations of financial irregularities, which he has strenuously denied and which the parliamentary authorities say they have found no evidence to substantiate.

The fact the accusations were coming from his estranged wife's family in the midst of a messy divorce seemed to neutralise the issue as far as other political parties were concerned.

But simmering tensions within Labour came to the boil when Bill Miller, number three on the party's list, failed to turn up for the campaign launch.

Glasgow-based Miller and Lothians-based Martin are not the closest of chums - especially now that Miller, an MEP for the past ten years, is likely to lose his seat thanks to Scotland's representation being reduced and Labour's gender balance policy promoting Catherine Stihler over his head to the number two slot.

THE Scottish launch of the Tories' European manifesto, with Michael Howard at Murrayfield, was overshadowed by another story about expenses.

Struan Stevenson, the Conservatives' number one, was one of several MEPs accused of signing on to claim the £180-a-day subsistence allowance for working in Brussels, then flying off elsewhere.

The practice does not break any rules and Stevenson said the system was flawed and that he had to claim the cash to pay for his accommodation in Brussels.

But the episode did not help the Tories, who seemed to be riding high at the start of the campaign but now appear to have lost momentum. SNP leader John Swinney has had to cope with constant sniping from inside his own party, not least the warning from former frontbencher Mike Russell that a bad result will mean a visit from the "men in grey kilts" telling him his time is up.

But Swinney has made things more difficult for himself by setting the SNP the target of overtaking Labour as the party with the most votes. That is now the benchmark against which he will be judged.

The United Kingdom Independence Party has created a splash with its star candidate, Robert Kilroy-Silk, the one-time Labour MP turned chat-show host sacked for branding Arabs "suicide bombers, limb amputators and women repressors", and the endorsement he attracted from actress Joan Collins.

UKIP is seen as a serious threat to Tory Euro-seats in England, and several Tory peers have defected to the party. And now there are signs UKIP is also making some impact in Scotland, with a new poll today suggesting it could win one or both of the Tories' seats - which would be a dramatic upset for the Conservatives, who were talking of a revival just a few weeks ago.

There are real fears the British National Party could make gains in some parts of England following the foothold it has established in recent council elections, but there is little sign of significant support in Scotland.

Also fielding candidates in Scotland are Operation Christian Vote, which is standing on a pro-life, pro-family ticket; Scottish Wind Watch, which opposes the "systematic destruction" of landscapes by wind farms; and independent Fergus Tait, who says Scotland needs a truly independent Euro MP not bound to party dogma.

Just as Labour here is likely to suffer because of Iraq, unpopular parties of government in other member states are also expected to fare badly in this week's polls.

AND Dr Stefan Wolff, from Bath University, who has studied central and east European politics, says in some of the new member states there is a significant Euro-sceptic vote, almost comparable to the UKIP surge.

"In Poland, for example, you have a strong anti-European current, with some fairly right-wing nationalist parties such as the League of Polish Families.

"Some of these countries have had very close calls in the referendums about joining. They don't necessarily want to go back to communism or the days of the eastern bloc, but they are very distrustful of what the European Union is doing, in their eyes, to traditional ways of life. They worry everything will be run by Brussels and they will have less say in their own affairs."

Dr Wolff says such feelings are strong in the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia as well as Poland. But, on the other hand, Hungary and Slovenia, among the new member states, are notably pro-European.

There have been some indications turn-out in the new member states is likely to be higher than the dismal percentage expected here. Politicians of all parties admit it has been a struggle to get the public interested in the election and turnout is expected to be down on the 24.7 per cent recorded in Scotland at the last Euro poll in 1999, with some pundits predicting it could even dip below 20 per cent.

The European Movement resorted to a pub crawl on Saturday night in a bid to whip up some enthusiasm for the election. But campaigners trying to boost the turn-out decided against organising a visit by a hot-air balloon which called in at the Meadows during the last European election campaign in 1999.

It did come to Scotland for the Scottish Cup Final at Hampden last month, but organisers said it was "prohibitively expensive" to arrange another outing north of the Border from the balloon's base in Wiltshire. And they said that since the number of people saying they intended to vote was higher in Scotland, the message was not so necessary here.

Scotland's seven MEPs are elected by proportional representation according to party lists. A total of ten parties are fielding seven candidates each plus the one independent standing as an individual. Voters are asked to place an X against one party or individual of their choice.

Once the votes are counted, the seats are allocated according to the proportion of votes each party receives.

The polls are open 7am-10pm on Thursday, but many other countries will not vote until the weekend, so counting of the votes in Scotland will not start until Sunday night, once the polls have closed everywhere.

The final Scottish result will not be known until around midday on Monday, when Edinburgh City Council chief executive Tom Aitchison, Scotland's returning officer for these elections, declares the winners from the Mercat Cross.

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