

# Socialist Equality Party

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## Tommy Sheridan's big hint that he will back the Scottish National Party

By Julie Hyland  
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Tommy Sheridan has told the *Daily Record* that he will throw his support behind one of the "main parties" in the elections to the Scottish parliament on May 3.

Sheridan heads "Solidarity-Scotland's Socialist Movement" since he and fellow Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) Rosemary Byrne split with the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) last year, after a court action he had taken against the *News of the World* following its allegations of sexual impropriety on Sheridan's part. The legal action saw members of the SSP publicly denounce one another, with Sheridan and party leader and MSP Colin Fox accusing one another of lying.

Sheridan won the libel action, which is being contested by the *News of the World*, published by Rupert Murdoch. Police are still investigating allegations of perjury on both sides.

Notwithstanding the Murdoch allegations, Sheridan remains something of a national treasure as far as the political elite in Scotland is concerned—someone whose populist demagoguery gives a much needed gloss to the devolved institutions created by the Blair Labour government and who utilises nationalism to blind workers to the essential class issues. In turn, the media has accorded the MSP an unprecedented degree of favourable coverage.

Under the headline, "Tommy the Holyrood kingmaker," *Daily Record* reporter Magnus Gardham reported Sheridan's plan "to rally his support behind one of the main parties—just a few days before the May 3 poll."

With widespread hostility to the Iraq war and the government's big business agenda, Labour is expected to lose heavily at the polls. Although the Scottish National Party (SNP) is likely to be the main beneficiary, it is anticipated that it will not win enough seats to form an overall majority and will be forced into a coalition with several other parties.

Solidarity is not standing any candidates in the constituency elections, only on regional lists. It hopes to retain its two MSPs through the additional member system in the eight regions. According to the *Record*, although Sheridan has not said explicitly whom he will back, "the Solidarity manifesto—which includes an independent Scotland, the scrapping of council tax and the non-replacement of Trident—suggests it will be the SNP."

The newspaper notes that these "are all goals shared by the SNP, though the two parties have argued over the details in the past. Sheridan has ruled out entering a coalition with other parties, so his planned move might be his best chance to win influence."

Sheridan's attempt at inscrutability as to which party can expect his endorsement is further undermined by Hugh Kerr, a former Labour Member of the European Parliament and now Solidarity's press officer, already having stated that he will vote for the SNP in his constituency.

Whether or not Sheridan could function as "kingmaker" remains to be seen. The acrimonious split in the SSP, which saw both sides running to the press to make the case against each other, has badly damaged the standing of both the old and new vehicles for fulfilling his political ambitions.

In 2005, the SSP had six MSPs through the regional list, not many of whom are likely to survive, especially as the SSP and Solidarity are standing directly against one another across Scotland.

What is clear is that Sheridan, in a bid to retain his own seat, is seeking to assure the powers that be that he will work constructively with the main parties whilst making an overt pitch for the Scottish nationalist vote.

Having successfully exploited popular hostility to Labour to position itself as a progressive, even left-wing alternative, the SNP is now seeking to reassure the transnational corporations that their interests are safe in its hands. The party is committed to reducing corporation tax by 8 percent, to 20 percent, in its bid for Scotland to compete with Ireland as the more favourable location for big business. This chimes in with demands from the ruling elite across the UK for an end to Scotland's supposed "dependency culture," i.e. its relatively higher rate of public spending compared to the rest of Britain.

The SNP has also shelved a previous pledge to hold a referendum on independence within 100 days of taking office, in order to prove that it can be trusted to run Scotland's economy efficiently.

In response Sheridan has declared that he will move for a referendum on independence within the SNP's now abandoned timetable. In his remarks to the *Record*, he effectively accused the nationalists of betraying their supporters, complaining that the party was "beginning to slide" on the issue of independence. "I believe the time is right now to stand on our own two feet," he said.

In another interview in the *Times* he described the SNP

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as “independence lite.”

Sheridan claims that he stands for a socialist, independent Scotland in contrast to the SNP’s support for a separate capitalist nation. But this is little more than window-dressing. Solidarity’s manifesto is replete with demands for the “Scottish people” to take back “their” resources, alongside the insinuation that it is the union with England—not private ownership of the means of production and class exploitation—which is responsible for the absence of genuine democratic participation and control.

A referendum on independence would “provide a direct mechanism to allow the people of Scotland a say on whether we want to run our country as a full, sovereign and independent nation—a nation free of the backroom bargaining, shady deals and stitch-ups between parties that have become so commonplace and the scourge of our democracy,” Solidarity claims.

Elsewhere Sheridan states that his party’s list of 16 bills that it will introduce if elected—ranging from free school meals to protection for the countryside—are proof that the Scottish parliament is capable of delivering “real and serious changes that will benefit working people and the families.”

Addressing a “Nationhood debate” organised by the Scotsman and including speakers from Labour, the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and the SNP, Sheridan told a Glasgow audience in February, “Whether you think Scotland should go it alone or not, there is nothing scientific in that. It is in your heart and in your head. We think that as an independent nation, we could make Scotland a better place.”

One could not conceive of a more damning statement for a supposed socialist and professed Marxist to make than such a profession of “heart-felt” patriotic nationalism.

Following Sheridan’s split with the SSP, the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party (SP) claimed that their decision to back Solidarity was at least in part motivated by the fact that the SSP were more nationalistic. The SSP has made independence one of its main slogans, also taking over the SNP’s demand for a referendum. Fox has argued, “Whilst the SNP are wavering, looking for coalition partners and relegating independence to the third division, voters will certainly recognise it is the Scottish Socialist Party who are this country’s firmest supporters of independence.”

Only last year, Neil Davidson writing in the *Socialist Worker* complained, “With debate growing over whether Scotland should leave the UK, the left should not get sucked in by half-formed arguments ... if we effectively write off the English working class, then grand sounding declarations about the ‘destruction of the British state’ lead, at the very least, to encouraging dangerous illusions in a Scottish reformist road to socialism.”

Despite providing the bulk of Solidarity’s membership and resources, however, neither the SWP nor the SP have said anything to oppose Sheridan’s nationalist pronouncements. Their silence is indicative of their

opportunist politics. Whilst portraying themselves as the advocates of “class unity” south of the border in Scotland, they are in reality actively promoting the anti-working-class perspective of separatism and bolstering the SNP and the Scottish parliament as a progressive alternative to Labour and Westminster.

Interviewed by the *Herald*, comic Mark Steel—a prominent supporter of the SWP and Solidarity—said, “If someone wants independence, so long as they don’t intend to massacre everyone else, which I don’t believe is the case in Scotland, then I’m all for it.”

Sheridan’s statements prove once again that there was no issue of principle involved in the split within the SSP. Solidarity and the SSP uphold the same programme and both parties marched alongside right-wing organisations such as the “Seed of the Gael,” the Free Scotland Party, the Scottish Enterprise Party and others in an “Independence First” demonstration in Edinburgh last month.

The social and political composition of this ragtag procession of less than 600 people underscores that, in their support for Scottish independence, the SSP and Solidarity—like the Northern League in Italy and the Vlaams Belang in Belgium—articulate the selfish interests of a layer of the regional bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie which utilize national separatism as a means of establishing direct relations with global capital and the European Union.

For the ex-radical fraternity around Solidarity and the SSP, the catastrophic consequences of this perspective for the working class—as in Yugoslavia—count for nothing. Their advocacy of national separatism is the means by which they seek to further ingratiate themselves into the apparatus of the capitalist state.

Internationally, organisations which once claimed it was possible to pressure the old workers’ organizations to the left have responded to the right-wing turn of the bureaucracies by shedding their Trotskyist and revolutionary pretensions and entering directly into bourgeois governments.

Italy’s Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista), for example, has played a crucial role in maintaining the Prodi government in power. Only last month it supported the deployment of troops to Afghanistan to aid the US-led occupation, despite massive popular opposition to the war amongst workers and youth within Italy.

This is precisely the role that Solidarity and the SSP are seeking to carve out for themselves. The Socialist Equality Party provides the only genuine socialist alternative to nationalism and the pro-business agenda of the Labour Party and the SNP. We insist that internationalism—the overcoming of all national divisions in the working class—is the essential foundation for the struggle against capitalism. The task before working people is not the construction of yet smaller nations, but the construction of the United Socialist States of Europe, as part of a world socialist federation. Only on this perspective can a successful struggle against globally organised capital be conducted.