Scottish National Party's reformist mask begins to slip

Steve James
8 October 1998

One might have expected that the recent Scottish National Party conference would have seen an aggressive advocacy of the policies that have brought it close to forming the first government in the newly devolved Scottish parliament next year. But no. The SNP was more concerned that its policies were not too closely examined, at least not by voters.

Since the successful referendum to establish a Scottish parliament last year, the SNP have been on a roll. Opinion polls show that it is likely to dominate the new parliament, or at least be in a position to form a coalition government, with SNP leader Alex Salmond as a likely First Minister.

Particularly in working class areas, the SNP has benefited from a growing hostility to the Labour government. In a recent local government by-election in Possil, Glasgow, Labour held the seat by only 34 votes. There was a 39.6 percent swing away from Labour, with the SNP vote increasing by 26 percent. In North Lanarkshire, where Labour's plans to sell off council services are threatening 1,000 jobs, there was a 36 percent swing to the SNP.

The possibility of an SNP government in Edinburgh has provoked concern in business circles. Would it raise taxes to pay for its promises of social reform? Would its plans for Scotland to secede from the United Kingdom create new barriers to finance and trade? The Blair Labour government appointed two new ministers--Gus MacDonald and Helen Liddel--to the Scottish Office charged with exploiting these concerns.

Labour Chancellor Gordon Brown used the occasion of the SNP conference to argue against Scottish Independence from the standpoint of the requirements of capital. 'The issue now, ' he said, 'is whether, having secured Home Rule, the well-being of Scotland is best advanced by withdrawing from the UK altogether.' Pointing to the high degree of economic integration within the UK, and the political structures required to organise the global economy, he continued, 'Modern economic interdependence means that decisions affecting prosperity will be made locally, nationally and internationally.'

Newspaper editorials and comment were written along the same lines. Murray Ritchie in the *Glasgow Herald* said that the SNP must make clear that independence would not impinge on the free flow of capital or damage economic ties with the rest of Britain. 'Scots could have it both ways, independence and that comfortable feeling that not much has changed, in our daily British lives. The British Isles would not sink into the seabed and there would still be economic union with England, free movement of goods, capital, and labour and an open border.... Only the political union would vanish.'

SNP leader Alex Salmond used the conference to show his business supporters like Railtrack, Tesco, Scottish Gas, and British Telecom that the party could be trusted to serve the interests of the major corporations. In contrast to years of demagoguery against 'English rule', he said the SNP has no intention of isolating Scottish-based business from the rest of Britain. 'Self-government is about responsibility and self-respect and out of the process will come new and better relations with our friends south of the border.... This party doesn't blame the English or anyone else for the state of Scotland.'

Independence was relegated to something 'touching the horizon', rather than an immediate aim. 'At each and every election we have the ability to vote ourselves into independence, and if we choose not to do that, then that is my fault for not arguing the case well enough,' said Salmond.

SNP tax spokesman John Swinney also used the conference to state that he has no intention of raising taxes on wealthy individuals. Echoing Salmond, he said that attempts to tax the rich and implement tax cuts for the poor must wait until full independence. The SNP is already pledged to slash the corporation tax to just 12.5 percent.

This shift to the right on social questions and hints at an indefinite postponement of independence risk alienating two quite disparate layers of SNP members and supporters. Firstly, the die-hard separatist element will see the fudge on independence as a betrayal. While the SNP expelled groups such as Seed of the Gael in the early 1980s, and more

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recently the 'Scotwatch' group who targeted English homeowners for arson attacks, similar elements are still a significant force within its ranks.

Secondly, and more importantly, the SNP could lose support amongst workers who accepted it as a progressive alternative following the Labour Party's betrayal of their social aspirations.

The SNP's reformist rhetoric has for many years served to obscure its role in articulating the interests of a privileged layer, epitomised by Salmond, a former chief oil economist for the Royal Bank of Scotland, and its most famous supporters like actor Sean Connery and transport multimillionaire Brian Souter.

The SNP was founded in 1934, but only emerged as a significant political force in the late 1960s, when Winnie Ewing was elected MP for Hamilton, a working class town east of Glasgow. Having opposed Polaris missile bases and the Vietnam War, it won support from layers of workers by claiming that the social problems they confronted were due to rule by Westminster and 'English' parties. Even so, it was correctly seen by many more as the 'Tartan Tories'. In the 1974 General Election, at the height of militant opposition to the Conservative government of Edward Heath and in the midst of the North Sea Oil boom, the SNP won 11 seats. They campaigned under the slogan 'It's Scotland's Oil', claiming that with self-government would come 'enormous employment opportunities' and 'vast capital wealth'.

In the early 1980s, with an influx of disillusioned ex-Labourites into its ranks, the SNP more determinedly put forward its reformist face to the working class in order to capitalise on opposition to the Thatcher government. Although the Tories ruled in Westminster, Labour was seen by many as the party of government in Scotland. Controlling most of the Scottish Local Authorities, it was Labour which imposed the attacks demanded by the Tories. The hostility this aroused largely benefited the SNP.

Despite winning support from working people, the SNP's programme is hostile to their interests. It is a negative response to the Thatcher government and the fundamental changes within the world economy that shaped her political agenda.

Thatcher's main aim was to open up Britain's economy to global trade and investment through the destruction of inefficient national industry and swingeing attacks on jobs, services and living conditions. In the process, she aggravated centrifugal pressures that now threaten to pull the British nation state apart.

A privileged layer within the middle class in Scotland and other areas saw the possibility of establishing their own direct connections with the global corporations. They understood that international trade, especially with Europe, is now more important than trade within Britain. The SNP embodies these strivings. In the late 1980s its main slogan became 'Independence within Europe' and its strategic vision to attract investment by offering Scotland as a cheap labour, low-tax production platform with ready access to the European market.

By the 1990s, substantial numbers of businessmen, trade union and Labour Party bureaucrats also began to agitate for greater political independence. The creation of the Scottish Constitutional Convention, incorporating business, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the trade unions and the church, was the result. While the SNP boycotted the convention because it did not call for outright independence, in 1997 the party joined the 'Scotland Forward' campaign that emerged from it. 'Scotland Forward' called for a 'yes' vote in the Labour government's referendum for a Scottish parliament. Its 'Business Case for a Scottish Parliament' made clear that the purpose of the parliament was to better organise lobbying for investment, to develop infrastructure projects and service the needs of the transnationals for cheap and skilled labour.

Earlier this year, while the first of the factory closures caused by the worldwide glut in silicon chip production were beginning, the SNP published its own 'Making Scotland World Class--a business case for independence'. Written by David McCarthy, an ex-chief executive of Unilever, this document insisted that an SNP-led Scotland would give business 'ready access to the Treasury, the Department of Trade and Industry, and a Central Bank'. Continued efforts to attract investment were essential. 'Potential inward investors will have the easy access to top government ministers and officials that is normal in small, highly successful countries.'

In his conclusion, McCarthy stated: 'I have no doubt that the leaders of an independent Scotland would make good use of the freedom to explore tax regimes more favourable to the creation of new Scottish business, the success of existing Scottish business, and the best kind of foreign investment in Scotland.' The SNP conference epitomised this pro-business perspective.

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