

Why did the Scottish National Party oppose the bombing of Iraq?

Steve James

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The Scottish National Party raised considerable objections to British participation in the United States' air attack on Iraq. This opposition was neither principled, nor motivated by humanitarian considerations. Rather it stemmed from the SNP's close orientation to Europe.

On December 17, when cruise missiles were still raining down on Baghdad, the SNP's defence spokesman George Reid warned: 'We must not have a policy that simply looks back to the gulf war, rather than forward to a solution to the problems posed by an aggressive regime in Baghdad that may threaten global security. The SNP has long advocated constructive involvement with opposition groups in Iraq.'

During the attack, the SNP's views were effectively censored from TV and press coverage outside of Scotland, as were the decisions of the Scottish TUC and Glasgow City Council's Labour group to oppose the bombing. It was not until December 21, once the attack was over, that SNP leader Alex Salmond was allowed to explain his party's position in the London *Times*.

Salmond attacked Prime Minister Tony Blair for failing to build an international consensus on Iraq like that assembled in the 1991 gulf war. He criticised Blair for the lack of a strategy to overthrow Saddam Hussein, bemoaned his willingness to jump to US demands, and said his actions will have 'given fresh cause for Europe to doubt the willingness of Britain to work in partnership on our continent.'

Salmond was immediately denounced by Defence Secretary George Robertson for using 'vitriolic, intemperate and unstatesmanlike language'. Salmond responded by reassuring his critics: 'The SNP do not oppose military action against Saddam in all circumstances--as our support for the 1991 international

action shows--but we oppose military strikes against Iraq in the absence of a clear strategy and international agreement, specifically co-operation with our European partners.'

Sections of big business share Salmond's concern that Labour's support for the US risks alienating Europe's governments and prejudicing British interests on the Continent. Fully 60 percent of Scottish trade is with Europe, and the figure is similar for the whole of the UK. The *Glasgow Herald*, which described the UK's support for the US as 'embarrassing', endorsed Salmond's emphasis on European military co-operation. The government 'should not fiddle while there is some scope for British influence in the birth of the euro,' the paper warned.

From the start, preparations for the attack on Iraq became a focus of political tensions over the electoral rise of the SNP and its implications for the future of the UK. Just a few days before cruise missiles were launched, George Robertson criticised the SNP's opposition to Trident missile submarines being maintained at the Faslane port on Scotland's West Coast. In an interview with the *Glasgow Herald*, he compared the possible future scenario facing the UK to the break-up of the former Soviet Union, which led to the division of the ex-Soviet Black Sea fleet between the Ukraine and Russia. Robertson continued, 'Faslane would be a very big headache.... The rest of the UK would be unlikely to say, let's just move Faslane to the Tyne or the Wear, or the Mersey, or indeed the Thames, and pay all the costs associated with that.'

Robertson's statement indicates the seriousness with which the ruling class is viewing the danger of a break-up of the UK along the lines advocated by the SNP. The Faslane base remains a key component of Britain's military machine, so any threat to its stability is viewed

with considerable alarm. As defence secretary, Robertson has overseen the most fundamental review of British military posture since the end of the Cold War. New strategy includes wider deployment for Trident submarines and the construction of two new full-size aircraft carriers, as part of an orientation towards fighting small wars anywhere on the globe. In line with this, during the November confrontation with Iraq, Trident missiles were equipped with tactical nuclear warheads for use against any Iraqi attack on UK or US forces. Doubtless, similar steps were taken this month.

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