

Scottish National Party leader criticises NATO bombing of Serbia

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Alex Salmond of the Scottish National Party has become the first party leader in Britain to attack the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia. In a five-minute television broadcast Monday evening on the BBC, shown only in Scotland, Salmond described the military campaign as "an act of dubious legality" and "unpardonable folly".

The Scottish National Party are challenging the Labour Party as the major political party in Scotland. If recent election results were repeated, the SNP would lead the new Scottish Parliament that is to be established in May.

The BBC had offered Salmond the opportunity to respond to the previous week's broadcast in defence of the NATO action by Prime Minister Blair. Comparing the aerial bombardment to the Luftwaffe's blitz of London and Glasgow during the Second World War, Salmond said that NATO's actions "may make matters even worse for the very people it is meant to be helping". It would "steel the resolve of the civilian population". He went on to complain that politicians should not pursue a "misguided" policy, and then ask servicemen to implement it.

"If we are to sanction intervention in Serbia then the policy must be capable ... of weakening Milosevic and helping Kosovo. A bombing campaign will do neither, indeed the chances are it will make both worse," Salmond insisted.

Salmond's opposition to the bombing is motivated by tactical, rather than humanitarian considerations. In his speech he advocated "a full-scale economic blockade of Serbia," the same type of sanctions policy that has been pursued against Iraq for the last nine years. It has reduced the country to conditions of virtual starvation, with thousands of children dying from malnutrition and disease.

Subsequently, in an op-ed piece in the March 31 *Guardian*, Salmond wrote, "The intervention of land troops is the only conceivable military policy that could make any difference", but maintained that this option "has been ruled out--for understandable political reasons". Hence his call to consider other alternatives. Another factor shaping the SNP's views is its strong political orientation towards Europe.

The SNP previously raised objections to British participation in the US air attack on Iraq last December. Then, Salmond attacked Blair for failing to build an international consensus on Iraq and his willingness to jump to US demands. This, he said, would give "fresh cause for Europe to doubt the willingness of Britain to work in partnership on our continent ... we oppose military strikes against Iraq in the absence of a clear strategy and international agreement, specifically co-operation with our European partners."

Salmond is articulating the concerns of a section of the ruling class that Blair is too servile to US foreign policy and lacks any coherent strategy. He has taken pains to point out that his concerns have all been voiced from other quarters--including General Sir Michael Rose. Salmond is also aware that popular support for the NATO bombing is extremely tenuous. He rules out the use of ground troops because opinion polls show that the current slim majority in favour of the NATO action could immediately crumble.

The Scottish *Herald* newspaper welcomed Salmond's remarks, saying, "His comments will have a resonance far beyond the borders of Scotland for it is clear that anxieties about the final resolution of this crisis exist across Britain, indeed throughout Europe."

The Blair government is as aware as the SNP of the lack of any firm popular support for NATO's bombing of Serbia. It has insisted that there is no alternative to

the present action, whilst seeking to prevent a serious discussion over the causes of the Balkan crisis. Parliament was not allowed a vote in its debate on the war last Thursday. Blair even declined to be interviewed by the BBC, as Labour spokesmen complained of its "negative" coverage.

Labour's response to Salmond's broadcast was hysterical. Blair described it as "totally unprincipled", while Defence Secretary George Robertson said it had "turned his stomach". Foreign Secretary Robin Cook went further, effectively denouncing the SNP leader as a stooge of the Serbian regime. "Alex Salmond will be the toast of Belgrade tonight," Cook said. "To stand aside from NATO and put himself as the only European leader to stand side by side with Milosevic shows he is simply unfit to lead."

The government's concern is that any expression of dissent by a leading political figure could generate active opposition to the war amongst broader layers of working people.



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