

Scottish National Party reelects Salmond as leader

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Three months after repeatedly denying he had any intentions of standing for the leadership of the Scottish National Party (SNP), Alex Salmond has been reelected to the post he resigned from in 2000. Salmond immediately set out to revive the SNP's flagging fortunes by simultaneously attacking Prime Minister Tony Blair over the British occupation of Iraq and presenting the SNP as Scotland's business friendly party.

Salmond, a former oil economist, was first elected leader of the SNP in 1990.

Hostility towards the Labour Party, long the dominant party in Scotland, meant that Salmond's combining of left rhetoric on certain policy issues with the advocacy of Scottish independence initially had some success electorally.

The SNP claimed that with independence, the decline of living standards that had accelerated under Blair could be reversed. At the same time, Salmond assured big business that the SNP would cut corporation tax so as to enable Scotland to compete with Ireland and other UK regions for investment.

With the advent of regional government in Scotland in 1999, following a 75 percent vote in favour of devolution, the SNP was expected to win a substantial number of seats in the Scottish parliament, perhaps enough to form a government.

But Salmond drew bitter hostility from all quarters of official British politics for his criticism of NATO's 1999 attack on Serbia. He described the war as "unpardonable folly", advocating instead a policy of sanctions. Salmond's stance was bound up with his party's orientation to the European powers. He viewed the US-led attack on Serbia as a demonstration of the overwhelming military supremacy of the United States and a threat to Europe.

Partly as a result of a sustained media campaign against Salmond, the SNP won far fewer seats than was

anticipated. In 2000 he resigned, to be replaced by the pedestrian John Swinney. Salmond went into semi-retirement in his Westminster seat.

But the intervening years have not been kind to the Scottish parliament, the SNP, or Swinney.

The regional parliament has become synonymous with the squandering of public wealth. The new Holyrood building cost, at the last count, a staggering £431 million pounds (\$US773 million), and has triggered a public inquiry.

Grotesque expenses on a talking shop for 129 members of parliament and their attendant officials stands in sharp contrast to the continuing pressure on health, education and social spending under the ruling Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition. Under First Minister Jack McConnell, the regional administration in Edinburgh has pressed ahead with Labour's policy of transforming every area of social, education and health spending into a source of profit, while social inequality has accelerated.

Many working people have concluded that Holyrood is as indifferent to their interests as Westminster, corporations based in Scotland are demanding radical measures to allow regional manufacturing, finance and information industries to fight their corner on the world market. Over the period of McConnell's tenure, overseas investment in Scotland has largely dried up.

Simultaneously, the SNP, which had hoped to use regional autonomy as a springboard towards full independence has gone into decline. Under Swinney, the SNP has played the role of loyal opposition in Holyrood, seeking to stabilise the new institution. As a result the SNP has found itself as discredited as Holyrood and the Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition.

The 2003 Scottish elections were a disaster for the SNP. Despite quietly demanding that the election should be turned into a referendum on the war, Swinney's calls were lost amidst the emergence of radical parties

ostensibly to the SNP's left.

The SNP lost 10 seats, while between them, the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and the Scottish Greens, picked up the same number. The SSP and the Greens have filled a political space once occupied by the SNP. Both promote the illusion that Scottish independence can be a vehicle for social reform. Both rely on the long standing confusion created by successive generations of Labour and Stalinist parties that Scottish nationalism has a progressive component. Both drape themselves in a Scottish flag that was once largely the political property of the SNP.

The SNP's membership appears to have collapsed to as few as 8,000 people, and its finances are in disarray. The party has been wracked by repeated and bitter internal feuds between the so-called fundamentalist wing committed to secession from the UK, and those aiming to replace Labour as the reliable party of corporate Scotland.

Matters came to a head after this year's European elections. The SNP vote slumped from 27 to 20 percent, barely ahead of the Conservative Party. Pundits considered that this would translate to around 14 percent in a general election, a figure that would wipe out the SNP in Westminster. Leading figures pontificated that their party was "going down the plughole". Most blamed Swinney who duly resigned, while a number of the SNP's leadership nervously put themselves forward to replace him.

The SNP's crisis was summed up by George Kerevan—a former member of the International Marxist Group turned Scottish nationalist. Writing in his regular column in the *Scotsman*, Kerevan complained that the leadership contenders had no policy ideas and were unable to attract support from the business class. They would be unable to manage the feuding wings of the SNP, and unable to offer any political opposition to the Labour Party.

Fearing that the entire devolution project is in danger of being completely discredited, Kerevan warned, "The issue now is not independence; it is maintaining the credibility of Scottish democracy." The solution was for the SNP to aim at forming a government in the next Scottish elections in 2007, a task for which the party required a confident TV and parliamentary performer able both to entice corporate support while dispensing popular sound bites to the media.

Within a fortnight, Salmond put himself forward and rapidly won support from all wings of the SNP and the media. Over the summer he set about organising the two faces of his campaign.

For business, Salmond, and his deputy Nicola Sturgeon propose a range of infrastructure and investment projects—rail links to airports, an electrified railway line between Glasgow and Edinburgh, a Scottish investment trust, Scottish embassies around the world, a Scottish broadcasting authority, and a bid to host the 2012 European football championship. They call for lower corporate taxes and new measures to force disabled workers into low paying work. These measures are distinguishable from current Labour policy only in details.

On the other hand, Salmond has sought to benefit from hostility to Blair and the war in Iraq. He is one of the most senior political figures to support a campaign initiated by Welsh nationalist MP Adam Price to impeach the British prime minister on the basis of his false claims over Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction.

The impeachment campaign charges Blair with "misleading" MPs and calls upon parliament to reassert its control—a presentation of events that is grossly misleading. Blair's war agenda was overwhelmingly carried by 434 votes to 124 in the parliamentary vote on February 26, 2003. This was in the face of mass international protests against war on Iraq, including a demonstration of almost two million people on the streets of London—the largest in history. And despite all the revelations over falsified intelligence reports, as well as numerous admissions by various agencies that Iraq did not possess Weapons of Mass Destruction, the vast majority of MPs continue to defend the war and insist that Britain must continue its illegal occupation of Iraq.

Salmond hopes, however, to utilise the impeachment campaign to put some distance between the Blair government and Holyrood, so as to prevent the project of Scottish devolution being utterly discredited before it has properly got off the ground.



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