

An exchange on the nationalism of the Scottish Socialist Party

Chris Marsden
25 April 2005

The following e-mail was sent in response to the Socialist Equality Party of Britain's statement, "The British working class and the 2005 General Election." It is followed by a reply written by Chris Marsden, the British SEP's national secretary.

Your article featuring the statement by the Socialist Equality Party (Britain) regarding the General Election 2005 was spoiled only by its complete misrepresentation of the Scottish Socialist Party. Although we stand on a platform calling for independence, we are NOT "nationalist." We are the only party in Scotland that offers any alternative to capitalism! Why, oh why, can't parties of the left work together rather than going for each other's throats all the time? If we can achieve change—no matter how small—does that not benefit the working class and lead them towards expecting, and demanding, more? I think sometimes that the fight for socialism is treated like one big playground game—where the insults fly and nobody actually does anything! I joined the Scottish Socialist Party because at last I found a party that wanted to really do something—not just play the game! It's hard enough for us to be fighting Tories—be they Labour, Liberal Democrats, Conservative or Scottish Nationalists—without having to watch our backs for people who are supposed to be fellow socialists! As we say in Scotland: Gie's a break!

N. A.
Scotland

Dear Ms A.,

The appraisal we have made of the Scottish Socialist Party is a political one, far removed from the sectarian hurling of epithets. We have defined the SSP as nationalist not because we wish to insult it, but because this constitutes the essential basis of the party's programmatic foundations.

Indeed, there is an element of political blindness in your own refusal to acknowledge the SSP's nationalism. Given the overt and repeated insistence of the party that its main aim is to secure an independent Scotland, whether socialist or not, to accept its espousal of various reformist measures and its rhetorical commitment to socialism as good coin requires either a suspension of critical faculties or an acceptance of the SSP's outlook.

For the benefit of yourself and our readers, it is necessary to review how we analysed the founding of the SSP and its policies.

The SSP was set up in September 1998 at the initiative of the Scottish Militant Labour group (SML), led by Tommy Sheridan. To do so, the SML wound up the Scottish Socialist Alliance, an umbrella organisation of middle-class radicals, ex-Labourites and Stalinists, and broke politically with its English parent group, the Socialist Party, and the Socialist Party's international body, the Committee for a Workers International (CWI).

The SML argued that its standing in Scotland meant that continued affiliation to the CWI was no longer necessary, and that the more militant and politically advanced Scottish working class should not be forced to wait on their more backward and conservative brothers and sisters south of the border. Instead, the newly formed Scottish Socialist Party would

fight to establish a Scottish Socialist Republic as a beacon that others could look to. This would at the same time break up the British nation state, which, it insisted, could only be a progressive development.

That the SSP was, in fact, writing off any possibility of a united struggle of the British, Scottish and international working class counted for little in its political calculations.

The immediate background to the founding of the SSP was the coming to power of the Blair government and its promise to establish devolved government in Scotland and a Scottish Parliament. The SSP saw an opportunity to capitalise on these developments and win the support of sections of the trade union and Labour bureaucracy, and of the membership and periphery of the Scottish National Party, as well as workers who held nationalist illusions.

The existence of such illusions within the working class was itself the product of the political betrayals carried out by the Labour and trade union bureaucracy on both sides of the Scottish border. Throughout 18 years of Conservative rule, from 1979 to 1997, Scotland had been a stronghold of the Labour Party, to which workers looked in vain for a struggle against the Tories. Instead, Labour lurched ever further to the right and facilitated the defeat of the 1984-1985 miners' strike and any other expression of militant opposition to the Thatcher government.

One of the most notorious examples of this was Labour's refusal to mount any opposition to the imposition of the iniquitous Poll Tax, even when this produced mass opposition, expressed in the non-payment campaign and demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands.

Scottish Militant Labour, and Tommy Sheridan in particular, first achieved political prominence as a result of their role in the leadership of the anti-Poll Tax campaign. But they utilised this as a platform to champion a nationalist response to the betrayals of the Labour bureaucracy. In effect, they wrote off the English working class, despite it having waged social struggles involving millions, by blaming it for the betrayals of its leaders, and at the same time glorified the Scottish working class for supposedly being more radical and socialist-minded.

Their real orientation, however, was to the recruitment of various lefts from the trade union and Labour bureaucracy in Scotland, from the Stalinists, and from the Scottish National Party and its periphery. All of these forces specialised in excusing their own political record of failure by claiming that the real problem was rule from London, and that if this were ended, then all things would be possible.

From the very beginning, the Scottish Socialist Party sought to compete with the Scottish National Party for the nationalist vote. It claimed that an independent Scotland could be achieved only by the working class, and that control of such a Scottish state would lay the basis for the building of socialism.

The SSP thereby advanced a perspective that in some respects echoed the Stalinist bureaucracy's theory of "socialism in a single country." In reality, the SSP's political line essentially accepted the framework of a capitalist Scottish state. Its activity was focused on securing seats in the

new Scottish parliament, with its candidates promising to utilise the reserves of North Sea oil and Scotland's rich resources to build a workers' paradise. Only the most formal statements were made to the effect that a struggle alongside workers in England, let alone in Europe and internationally, was necessary for the realisation of socialism.

It was, in short, a national reformist perspective, with a veneer of revolutionary rhetoric, which differed from that previously advanced by Labour only in that it was based on the narrower and more limited foundations of a Scottish state, rather than the far greater resources available in the whole of Britain.

In an article published in October 1998, (See "Scottish Socialist Party fosters nationalist divisions"), I commented: "For Marxists, socialism is the product of the independent political action of the working class. This necessitates workers understanding that their social and political interests cannot be reconciled with those of the bourgeoisie.

"Ever since the publication of the Communist Manifesto in 1848, internationalism has been the cornerstone of the struggle for socialism. Nationalism is the ideology of the bourgeoisie, because its rule developed through and led to the consolidation of the nation state. Socialism, by its very nature, can only be a world system realised through the unification of workers across all borders. Its aim is to end the division of the global economy into antagonistic nations by liberating production from the fetters of private ownership, placing it at the service of the world's people. This requires the development of a consistent internationalist outlook amongst workers.

"Scottish Militant Labour is indifferent to the central task of overcoming the political influence of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois forces over the working class. Their new party is founded on the claim that encouraging nationalism will provide a new basis for socialism. But the perspective of Scottish separatism—a struggle 'against Britain' and 'for Scotland'—cannot demarcate the specific interests of the working class from the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois layers who champion independence. It ties the working class politically to the bourgeoisie, while pitting Scottish workers against those in other countries.

"The extraordinary integration of the world economy that has taken place in the past two or three decades—a process widely known as globalisation—is the most graphic confirmation of the necessity for workers to base their own struggles on an internationalist perspective. In contrast, Scottish Militant Labour portrays socialism as the product of a gradual process of reforms implemented through the new Scottish Parliament."

The Socialist Equality Party of Britain rejected the threadbare efforts of the SSP to portray separatist sentiment amongst Scottish workers as progressive. Citing events in Yugoslavia, I warned that the "class character of the demand for separatism cannot be established simply by identifying the number of workers who support it. The question that must be posed is, 'Whose interests are served by Scottish nationalism?'

"...Today, the world economy predominates over all national economies. Massive transnational corporations transfer production to wherever they can achieve a higher rate of return on their capital. To attract inward investment and remain competitive in the world market, every country, and even competing regions within countries, is engaged in a frantic scramble to demolish welfare provisions and slash the living standards of working people. The movement for Scottish independence is rooted in these developments.

"The Scottish National Party explicitly declares that the purpose of Scottish independence is to create a cheap labour platform that can compete with the rest of the UK and Ireland for investment from companies seeking access to the European market. The Blair Labour government, though opposed to outright separation, pushed through devolution for Scotland, Wales, London and the English regions in order to divide the working class and encourage regional competition for

investment as a means of slashing public spending. Broad sections of the Scottish Labour Party and trade union apparatus favour outright separatism because they are anxious to benefit from their own relations with the global corporations.

"The purpose of the Scottish Parliament, hailed as a new democratic forum by Scottish Militant Labour, is to provide a regional apparatus more directly responsive to corporate needs. It will also be better equipped to politically control social discontent in the working class."

I suggest strongly that you read this article, dealing as it does with the political origins of the SSP in the opportunist perspective pursued historically by the Militant group. But we should now examine to what extent this analysis of the political character of the SSP has been confirmed in the nearly seven years since its formation.

The Scottish Socialist Party has succeeded in winning considerable support, thanks to popular opposition to the Blair government, which has pursued policies in no way different to the policies of the Conservatives it replaced, and as a result of the equally right-wing trajectory of the Scottish National Party. This has allowed the SSP to benefit from the system of proportional representation in Scotland and secure the election of six members of the Scottish Parliament and acquire a number of positions within local government.

The breakup of the Labour Party and its attacks on the working class have also secured for the SSP the backing of the Scottish region of the Rail Maritime and Transport union and an Edinburgh branch of the Communication Workers Union. The SSP has also been provided with extensive and, it must be said, often friendly coverage by the Scottish media. It has, in short, secured for itself an important place within the political establishment.

But the greater the political prominence achieved by the SSP, the more it has shifted emphasis away from socialism and towards an even more overt populist nationalism.

Two examples can be cited in this regard.

The first is the SSP's campaign in last year's European elections. Its manifesto was unashamed in its appeal to nationalist sentiment and made little effort to conceal that its perspective was not the formation of a Scottish socialist republic, the achievement of which was, at best, relegated to the distant future. For all practical purposes, in the here and now, the SSP was advocating an independent Scotland on capitalist foundations and a government implementing certain reformist measures, with the assistance provided by European Union social funding.

The manifesto asked voters a series of rhetorical questions, such as, "Do you want a Scotland which is genuinely free and independent...a Scotland which controls its own resources—our oil, our land, our fishing, our transport system, our industries...a peaceful, non-aligned Scotland which will stand on the side of justice rather than on the side of might and wealth?"

But when it came to explaining the basis for realising such goals, the SSP took pains to advocate only a reformist version of socialism. It wanted a "diverse and democratic Europe," based on "voluntary co-operation from below," in which "all nations are equal."

It stressed that its version of internationalism "does not mean subscribing to a theory that asserts that bigger is always better," and continued: "The immediate goal of the SSP is not to create gigantic mega-states, nor to replace capitalist globalisation with socialist globalisation. Our aim is to build socialism from below—a socialism that is based on decentralisation, diversity and voluntary co-operation between nations.

"Socialism in the 21st century will not be built from the top tables of Brussels downwards, but will have to be fought for at local and national level upwards."

This is as open a rejection of the Marxist programme of world socialist revolution as could be imagined. The SSP declared itself to be first and foremost the defender of sovereign nations, rather than the historic and

independent interests of the international working class.

The manifesto went on to argue that there is, in fact, “nothing intrinsically internationalist or progressive about a united Europe, any more than there is anything intrinsically progressive or internationalist about the United Kingdom,” and to associate the unification of Europe with “Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists in 1949, which called for a ‘New Europe.’”

The SSP sought to conceal its nationalist appeal by making out that it was speaking only of the capitalist European Union, but it offered no hint that it was advocating a United Socialist States of Europe—a Europe under the control of the working class—as an alternative. Rather, the sections of its manifesto that followed the above-quoted excerpts bore the heading “Resisting globalisation,” in which the SSP insisted that the first task of an SSP Member of the European Parliament would be to “fight for an independent socialist Scotland,” while forming alliances with pro-capitalist formations such as the European Social Forum and undefined “progressive forces worldwide.”

The SSP take pains to make clear that its formal espousal of a “socialist Scotland” does not extend to Europe and does not cut across working with nationalist groupings that are opposed to such an alternative. It does not call for a socialist Europe, but instead advocates a “genuinely *democratic and social* Europe,” made up of “a commonwealth of independent states based on social priorities” (emphasis added).

There can be no more obvious way of calling for a reformist programme than advocating a “social democratic” Europe, even if the words are transposed.

The SSP’s proposed European “commonwealth” would elect national representatives to a Constituent Assembly, which would then discuss such issues as “Which powers would be shared and which retained at national level?” and “What would be the basic social and economic principles underpinning a new Europe?”

And fear not! Should anyone decide that capitalism is a better economic system than socialism, there will be a “right of veto by all affiliated states on vital decisions.”

It should be added that, in the meantime, the SSP’s hostility to the European Union is highly conditional. It does not prevent the SSP from championing access to structural funding for Scotland, which it complains receives only £1 billion, compared with £1.5 billion for Wales.

The SSP’s European election manifesto demonstrates how its embrace of nationalism in Scotland translates into a perspective for the Balkanisation of Europe that would have consequences no less reactionary than the civil war that erupted in the former Yugoslavia.

Its alliance with “left and progressive political parties and movements resisting national oppression in Europe and worldwide” commits it to support for separatist movements in Wales, Catalonia and the Basque Country. Indeed, the SSP embraces every manifestation of national separatism and the breakup of existing states.

It maintains: “Even relatively small and homogeneous constructs within Europe, such as the UK and Spain, have failed to transform themselves from multinational states to unified nation states; such is the power of national identity and the sense of national injustice in the smaller nationalities within the UK and the Spanish State.... Today, pro-independence parties command widespread support within the marginalised nations of the UK and the Spanish State.”

This is the very opposite of Marxism and socialism. Instead of the unification of the world’s people irrespective of skin colour, language, nationality or creed, the SSP is urging the replacement of the existing system of nation states with even smaller states based upon the reactionary notion of the inviolability of ethnic and cultural differences.

The second development illustrating the full extent of the SSP’s nationalism is its sponsorship of the so-called “Declaration of Independence” made at Calton Hill, Edinburgh, on October 9, 2004.

Known as the Calton Hill declaration, the document was launched at a ceremony attended by a few hundred people held on the same day as the opening of the new Holyrood Scottish Parliament building. It was drawn up, according to SSP reports, with the “assistance” of writer Alasdair Gray, who co-authored with Adam Tomkins, professor of constitutional law at Glasgow University, the book *How We Should Rule Ourselves*.

As well as leading members of the SSP, a number of disgruntled former supporters of the Scottish National Party supported the Calton Hill ceremony. These included the octogenarian nationalist Ian Hamilton QC, whose greatest moment of fame was helping to steal the Stone of Destiny, or Stone of Scone (the traditional coronation stone of Scottish kings seized by Edward I in 1296), from Westminster during the 1950s, and Independent Member of the Scottish Parliament Campbell Martin, who previously spent 27 years in the SNP. A number of performers and high-profile Scottish authors were also present.

The character of a declaration endorsed by so many prominent nationalists is naturally devoid of any pledge to create a socialist republic. It states that, “We the undersigned call for an independent Scottish republic built on the principles of liberty, equality, diversity and solidarity,” to be “brought about by a freely elected Scottish Government with full control of Scotland’s revenues.”

It is clearly framed as a reformist document, limiting itself to a general commitment to a “more equal society,” brought about “through the redistribution of our vast wealth.”

The SSP is well aware that it has signed on to a campaign that can lead only to the creation of a Scottish Republic on capitalist foundations. Tommy Sheridan admitted as much in his own address at Calton Hill.

He told the gathering, “Let’s be clear, we all have our own hopes, our aspirations, our dreams for a new Scotland, some of us believe in a socialist Scotland, others want a social democratic Scotland.”

But the SSP simply agrees to disagree. “This movement today, I hope, is the beginning of a new movement that unites citizens across party boundaries, across the whole of Scotland, and becomes an annual ongoing event to build for a future independent republic of Scotland!”

One cannot unite citizens across party boundaries unless one abandons the perspective of socialism altogether. It means building political alliances with sections of the SNP and Labour and trade union bureaucrats on a perspective that is explicitly opposed to socialism and attributes all of Scotland’s woes to the continued existence of the monarchy.

This perspective serves not as a staging post towards a future socialist republic, but as a means of politically subordinating the working class to the local bourgeoisie by asserting the primacy of a common national interest shared by all Scots. Indeed, the most inglorious moment in Sheridan’s miserable performance at Calton Hill was when he asked, “Do we belong to the British nation or do we belong to the Scottish nation?”

The SSP’s claim that it is appealing to a widespread nationalist belief amongst Scottish workers that independence is the way forward is a distortion of reality. Nationalist sentiment exists for the reasons I have cited above, but it is extremely confused and does not translate into a powerful impulse to separate from England. To date, the Calton Hill declaration has been signed by fewer than 600 people online.

The British working class shares a common history and faces a common oppressor, and anyone with more than a cursory knowledge of history will have a degree of contempt for any claim that the bourgeoisie of Scotland are part of an oppressed people. It is class oppression and not national oppression that is at the root of all the problems facing Scottish workers, and their allies in any struggle for a better life are workers in the rest of Britain and throughout the world, and not fellow “Scots.”

In an era in which workers face the harsh reality of globally operating capitalist corporations, this is a perspective that will find a powerful response in Scotland. The Scottish Socialist Party does not advance such a perspective because its real constituency is the petty-bourgeois layer that

once gravitated to the Scottish National Party. It is on the backs of such alliances and recruits that Sheridan and company hope to entrench themselves as a major force in Scottish politics in general, and within the comfortable environs of Holyrood, in particular.

Scottish nationalism offers nothing to the working class. It serves only to keep workers politically demobilised and prevent them from grasping their own independent interests by waving the Saltire in their face at every turn. That is the objective political role played by the SSP.

Given your own commitment to socialism, I would urge you strongly to reconsider your support for a party whose programme divides the working class and prevents an effective struggle against capitalism.

Yours fraternally,
Chris Marsden



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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