

The political lessons of the split in the Scottish Socialist Party—Part 1

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This is the first of a two-part analysis.

A split in the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) was finalised on the weekend of September 2-3 when meetings of two rival parties were held at the same venue in Glasgow within 24 hours of one another.

The first meeting was of what remains of the SSP led by Alan McCombes, and the second the newly created Solidarity-Scotland's Socialist Movement headed by Tommy Sheridan.

The immediate circumstances surrounding the split centre on the libel action taken by Sheridan against Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World* newspaper. In articles published in 2004, the newspaper alleged that Sheridan, one of the SSP's six Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), had frequented swingers clubs, on one occasion with its own sex columnist.

Sheridan had insisted on taking the libel action, believing that the *News of the World* could offer no proof of its charges. An executive meeting of the SSP on November 9, 2004 opposed his decision and a deal was agreed whereby Sheridan stood down as party convenor citing family reasons and pursued his libel action on his own.

However, in response to leaks from within the SSP, the newspaper sought access to minutes of the November meeting to strengthen its case against Sheridan. This resulted in police raids on the SSP headquarters, the imprisonment of McCombes for initially refusing to hand over the minutes, and tens of thousands of pounds in legal costs.

In July, Sheridan won his case on a split verdict and was awarded £200,000 in damages. But the safeguarding of Sheridan's reputation came at the cost of wrecking his organisation.

Having secured the party minutes, the *News of the World* subpoenaed leading members of the SSP to testify under oath as to whether Sheridan had admitted the truth of the substance of the tabloid's claim. With eleven executive members stating that he had done so, Sheridan accused his comrades of lying as part of a political vendetta against him.

The *News of the World* has since appealed what it describes as a "perverse" outcome, while the police have announced an investigation into the allegations of perjury on both sides.

After his win, Sheridan denounced the majority of the SSP leadership, including four fellow members of the Scottish parliament, as "political scabs" and vowed to launch a struggle for the "heart and soul" of the SSP. Instead, within weeks, Sheridan and fellow MSP Rosemary Byrne decamped to form Solidarity.

The SSP was formed from an amalgamation of a number of radical, Stalinist and nationalist groups. Sheridan's new venture was supported by the two largest of these, the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party. The SSP and Solidarity have made clear their intention to stand against one another in next May's local authority elections.

The unprincipled character of the split is underlined by the pledges of both factions to uphold the same programme. Their respective meetings were characterised by an insistence that no political differences are involved. The dispute was simply for or against Tommy Sheridan.

Even if one were to accept Sheridan's claim that by providing testimony in court the SSP majority collaborated with the hated Murdoch press against a fellow socialist—and this would require overlooking the fact that it was Sheridan's decision to launch the case despite the expressed wishes of his own party that placed his comrades in court—one would be duty bound to make a political account of why such a situation developed.

Sheridan has not published any political statement on the split. His faction broke in advance of a party conference scheduled for October without a single document being written to explain its standpoint, much less having conducted a struggle within the SSP.

Sheridan claims he was forced to break away because the SSP was so degenerate and rotten and the "atmosphere" so "poisonous" that it was impossible to remain a moment longer. But how is it possible that Sheridan was apparently unaware until last month that his party had become so thoroughly corrupted that it was prepared to join an unprincipled witch-hunt against him? A witch-hunt, moreover, led by McCombes, who since the 1990s has been Sheridan's closest political collaborator, co-authoring numerous articles, statements and even a book. And one that includes virtually every member of the executive and most of the party's MSPs.

Sheridan decided the SSP was destroyed politically only when it disagreed with him, and the majority of the membership refused to support his public denunciations of his own organisation.

What of the SSP? The McCombes faction has also made no political accounting of the split. It claims that Sheridan's actions are those of an uncontrollable egomaniac who, rather than face the truth and accept the possible tarnishing of his reputation, concocted false charges of a political vendetta, publicly denounced his comrades in court and the bourgeois media, and then set up a rival organisation to cover his tracks.

But how did Sheridan, who joined Militant, the SSP's forerunner, as a student become such a monster? And why did the SSP repeatedly make compromises with such an individual, concealing the depth of his political opportunism from its members and the working class?

These are not merely factional issues. The SSP had significant influence and was able to convince some five percent of the electorate in Scotland that it represented a political alternative to the Labour Party. Both wings of the SSP have a political responsibility to explain the issues involved in their split.

This responsibility goes beyond the SSP. The whole of the middle-class radical left in Britain are implicated in these events. Not only was virtually every nominally left tendency within Britain involved in the SSP, but these same tendencies have played an equally decisive role in its demise.

Neither the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) nor the Socialist Party (SP) has made any political explanation of their decision to decamp from the SSP to join Solidarity, other than to cite as justification Sheridan's high public profile.

Despite being the larger of the two tendencies within the UK, the SWP was a minority faction within the SSP. It now provides the majority of

Sheridan's membership, and hopes to use the split as a means of establishing an electoral vehicle in Scotland along the lines of its Respect-Unity coalition in England.

As for the SP, it has lined up behind someone who barely a decade ago was one of the main instigators of a split with it and its international body, the Committee for a Workers International (CWI). The Sheridan/McCombes split reduced the SP to a small faction within the SSP. With Sheridan having lost the bulk of the SSP's membership, the SP now hopes to regain organisational influence within the new party.

Given such unprincipled manoeuvrings, it is no wonder that none of the various tendencies are prepared to make any political accounting for the SSP's collapse. Instead, surrounded by the wreckage of their joint political venture, they loudly proclaim that the latest split provides an ideal opportunity to construct a mass socialist party.

Such criminal light-mindedness towards the education of the working class is typical of the middle-class radical left. But for Marxists, the essential foundation of any genuine socialist development is the clarification of issues of programme and perspective.

The seeds of the SSP's collapse must be sought not in the immediate factional struggle between Sheridan and McCombes, but in the opportunist politics that shaped it.

The SSP's roots are in the Militant Tendency, which operated as a faction within the British Labour Party for most of the post-war period. Militant was characterised by outright hostility to any attempt to build a party independent of Labour. It insisted that Trotsky's struggle to build the Fourth International had been shipwrecked.

Founded by Ted Grant in the early 1950s, Militant rejected a perspective based on the working class as the agent of revolutionary social change. The coming to power of Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and China showed that "workers' states" could be formed without a revolutionary movement of the working class led by a Marxist party, Grant claimed. The Stalinist bureaucracy, and in Britain the Labour Party and the trade unions, would act as the vehicles for socialism. Militant saw its role as helping the bureaucracy move to the left, arguing for a programme of nationalisations, legislated in parliament, and other social reforms.

For years it functioned as a small group confined to Britain. It grew significantly only in the 1980s, taking leadership of the Labour Party Young Socialists and control of the Liverpool City Council. This was to prove to be both its high water mark and its downfall.

Militant benefited from the radicalisation of broad layers of workers and youth that developed against the Thatcher Conservative government, which came to a head with the 1984/85 miners' strike. Support came from those within the Labour Party who were hostile to the right-wing trajectory of the party and the Trades Union Congress, and were moving toward a break from reformism. Instead of encouraging this development, Militant sought to limit workers to exerting pressure on Labour.

The defeat of the miners' strike demonstrated the impossibility of opposing the right wing on the basis of such policies. Within a year, Labour's national conference supported the expulsion of Militant's editorial board from the party. The next period was characterised by a forced march to the right by Labour, culminating in the junking of its old reformist programme under Tony Blair.

This development was but one manifestation of the universal degeneration of all the old organisations of the official workers' movement, which found its most significant expression in the liquidation of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy and adoption of capitalist market policies.

What united social democracy and Stalinism was their advocacy of economic nationalism.

Stalinism's programme of "socialism in one country" represented a break with the internationalist perspective of world socialist revolution. It articulated the interests of a bureaucratic elite that derived its privileges

from having usurped political power from the Soviet working class.

The social democratic parties, while formally professing socialism as an ultimate goal, opposed a revolutionary struggle for workers' power, and instead advocated limited social reforms and nationalisations (the "mixed economy"), which were made possible in the period of the post-war boom by state regulation of the economy.

The unprecedented development of globalised production that occurred from the mid-1970s onwards cut the ground from under all such nationally-based organisations and programmes. The bureaucracies responded by repudiating socialism and transforming themselves into the avowed defenders of big business.

These developments refuted Militant's perspective and it was forced to abandon work in the Labour Party, provoking a split with Grant. Militant, now under the leadership of Peter Taaffe, advanced what it described as the "Open Turn"—the formation of independent parties. However, its fundamental axis remained the same—the political subordination of the working class to whatever political tendencies dominated the labour movement in each country.

In Scotland, where Militant had come to the head of the anti-poll tax movement that was first initiated by the Scottish National Party, this meant adapting to nationalism.

Sheridan had won popular support for opposing the forcible sale of the assets of non-poll tax payers, for which he was imprisoned. He became the figurehead for the newly established Scottish Militant Labour (SML), which advocated independence and argued that the Scottish working class was more radical than its English counterpart and would pioneer the struggle for socialism.

The SML also pioneered the next tactical shift by the Taaffe group—a regroupment of various radical, Stalinist and nationalist groups in the Scottish Socialist Alliance in 1996. It charted the same course south of the border, forming the Socialist Alliance on the basis that the political collapse of the Stalinist and Labour parties meant that ideological distinctions on the left no longer mattered.

Both McCombes and Taaffe insisted that Labour's degeneration would not open the way for the construction of a Marxist party. Workers were not ready for such a development, they maintained. All that was possible was to replicate the circumstances that led to the creation of the Labour Party as a "broad church" at the turn of the 20th century by uniting everyone into a common organisation on a reformist programme. The most important constituency for such a new party would be made up of Labourites and trade union bureaucrats who would come forward to oppose Blair's rightward turn.

This shared perspective was not enough to maintain the organisational cohesion of the Militant group. In 1997, Labour came to power pledged to devolving certain powers to Scotland and Wales. Portrayed by the government as a means of ensuring greater local democracy, the newly created Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly were used to encourage regional competition for transnational investment and to pit workers against one another.

These political realities counted for nothing as far as Sheridan and McCombes were concerned. They embraced the new constitutional arrangements and eagerly anticipated winning seats in the Scottish parliament based on proportional representation.

Convinced that Sheridan's high profile in Scotland would afford them a tremendous advantage, they were determined not to allow any issues of political principle or any organisational obstacles to cut across their path. One such obstacle was their continued affiliation with the Taaffe group, which was viewed as an impediment to attracting other tendencies into a single party, particularly nationalist elements who resented any connection with the "Brit left."

In 1998 the Scottish Socialist Party was launched and Sheridan and McCombes broke with the CWI, which was reduced to a small minority

tendency within the new organization, with no special status. The new party called on workers to fight for national independence in order break up the British state and bring into effect an explicitly “Scottish” brand of socialism. Utilising the revenues of North Sea Oil, the Holyrood parliament would be able to implement the reformist nationalisations that Militant once advocated on an all-Britain basis, it claimed.

McCombes provided the ideological justification for this turn in a series of articles portraying Scottish nationalism as a proletarian and anti-imperialist tendency. Sheridan’s possible election to the parliament was hailed as the first step towards the realisation of self-determination for the Scottish people.

Sheridan became an MSP in 1999. This initial success convinced the Socialist Workers Party, which had also embraced Scottish nationalism in response to the setting up of Holyrood, to join the SSP.

To be continued



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