

Millionaire landowner to save the National Health Service?

The bankrupt alliance of Scottish Voice and NHS First

By Niall Cooper, Socialist Equality Party candidate for West of Scotland
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Labour's drive to privatise the National Health Service (NHS) through the deeply unpopular Private Finance Initiative (PFI), combined with hospital closures and staff and equipment shortages, has provoked widespread anger and opposition.

This sentiment has produced a raft of independent candidates across Britain standing in local and national elections in an effort to prevent the undermining of vital local medical services.

In the Scottish parliamentary elections of 2003, an independent hospital campaigner overturned one of Labour's safest seats in Strathkelvin and Bearsden where the Stobhill General Hospital is faced with closure. In the current Scottish, Welsh and English local elections many more NHS candidates are posing a threat to Labour.

The NHS First party was formed in Scotland in 2006 to bring together various NHS campaigns in a combined effort to win influence in the Scottish Parliament. An examination of the policies and the resulting alliances of NHS First reveal an organisation that should not be trusted by workers to defend socialised medicine.

Founded by Mev Brown, a former Conservative parliamentary candidate, the party opposes PFI as too costly and inefficient—a view gaining increasing acceptance by sections of the ruling establishment who favour other more cost-effective mechanisms of privatisation.

On the subject of low pay for NHS nurses, whose salary increase of around 2.5 percent for the new financial year is below the rate of inflation, the NHS First website urges fiscal responsibility, warning, "As a matter of pragmatism any prospective pay rise would

have to be found from within the existing NHS budget."

NHS First also advocates a series of objectives that could come from the pro-big business manifestos of Labour, Tories or the Scottish National Party: "To promote good citizenship and place equal importance on citizens' responsibilities as on citizens' rights", "good value for money for taxpayers" and placing "equal importance on enterprise and wealth creation as on wealth distribution".

It comes as little surprise therefore that NHS First should have found a political bedfellow in the Scottish Voice, an outfit created by millionaire businessman Archibald Stirling. A former officer in the elite Scots Guards regiment and hereditary laird (a minor noble) of the Keir estate, Stirling's party is largely made up of disaffected Conservatives.

Scottish Voice has lent its political and financial support to NHS First, whose candidates are running on a joint ticket in several constituencies and regions. On the alliance Mev Brown has stated, "Together Scottish Voice and NHS First are committed to finding real solutions to the challenges Scotland faces today, free from narrow party ideology"—a convenient omission, as any overt statement of both parties' ideological roots in the Tory party would discredit their pretensions to be the saviours of the NHS.

NHS First's candidate for Coatbridge and Chryston and the Central Scotland Region, Gaille McCann, who happens to be a former Labour councillor in Glasgow, says on the Scottish Voice website of their patron, "Archie Stirling is from a very different background than me, but is filled with compassion and caring for his fellow Scots. I realized then that it doesn't really

matter from whence we come but what is more important is where we are all going. We can begin to rebuild our communities and our society by making Scotland, once more, a place to be proud of, a place where everyone plays their part a place where we all belong.”

McCann is clearly going to the right.

Such nationalistic invocations of classless “Scottishness” cannot obscure the pro-big business and anti-working class policies of Scottish Voice. In “Finding Our Voice”, a pamphlet by Stirling available to download on their website, he articulates views essentially the same as the Conservative and Labour parties.

Despite claiming not to promote a “free-market prescription for Scotland’s ills”, it is exactly “free market” ideology that Scottish Voice advocates. “The statist mentality that grips Scotland at all levels of government and public administration is suffocating the nation. We have to replace this with a new Scottish spirit of enterprise if we are to transform the country into a viable and vibrant economy,” the pamphlet states.

Scotland, Stirling intones, is his “homeland” and the “greatest country in the world” but one held back by “state handouts”, “red tape” and business taxation—all classic hobby horses of the right.

The party’s website claims that it does not have policies but instead “aims and goals”, which include cutting “public sector bureaucracy” and the “waste and mismanagement in local government”, as well as the removal of “unnecessary and over-bearing bureaucracy from enterprise”.

Scottish Voice also calls for an end to public ownership of state schools, which are to be “taken out of the control of councils and handed back to the people who know best how to run them—the teachers, parents and pupils”—for which, please read, “Privatise schools now!”

For good measure Stirling directs his ire at the usual suspects of the right, “excessive business rates”, while calling for the restoration of “Scotland’s police forces to full strength.”

Stirling is the nephew of Colonel Sir David Stirling, the founder of Britain’s elite military unit the Special Air Service and a co-plotter of a military coup against the Labour government of Harold Wilson in the 1960s.

With close ties to the British military and a base of support among disgruntled Tories, Scottish Voice opposes independence and advocates the maintenance of the political union between Scotland and England, insisting that “devolution must be made to work”.

Reflecting a growing sentiment among sections of the Scottish elite and petty-bourgeoisie that separation from England and Wales could provide financial rewards, Scottish Voice nonetheless hold open the door to independence stating on their website, “The position of Scotland within the Union is not central to this movement, it is something we can decide upon in the future.”

With a pro-Union vacuum having been left by the collapse of the Conservative party in Scotland and the looming disaster facing Labour, Scottish Voice and NHS First are seeking to step into the breach. Stirling has been given relatively extensive and favourable coverage by the Scottish media, with some polls indicating that Scottish Voice could win a seat in the Scottish Parliament.

Such unstable, populist and nationalist outfits as Scottish Voice and their NHS First allies offer no way forward for workers and youth looking to save health care from evisceration by Labour’s privatisation agenda. The Socialist Equality Party is standing in the Scottish and Welsh elections to offer a perspective capable of uniting students and workers across Britain with their class brothers and sisters in Europe and internationally in a struggle to build a socialist society capable of meeting the social and healthcare needs of all.



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