

Scotland: Debate on independence sidelines Iraq war

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On April 13, representatives of the Socialist Equality Party attended a meeting at the University of Glasgow entitled “Which way for Scotland?”

Billed as a debate between the “three pro-independence parties” on their vision for a separate Scotland, the platform comprised Rosemary Burnett of the Scottish Greens, Alex Neil of the Scottish National Party and Jim McVicar of the Scottish Socialist Party.

The event was a desultory affair. Despite being one of the only meetings held on campus during the ballot for the Scottish parliament on May 3, only a handful of people were in attendance. It seemed that none of the parties had been able to mobilise any of their supporters.

The mood was in stark contrast to that amongst the thousands of workers and youth that the SEP has spoken with during its own intervention into the Scottish elections. Opposition to the Iraq war and occupation is widespread, and the demand for Prime Minister Tony Blair to be tried as a war criminal is greeted with enthusiastic support.

At the University of Glasgow itself, where the SEP is hosting a lecture by Editorial Board Chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* David North, entitled “In defence of Leon Trotsky—a reply to the post-Soviet school of falsification”, there is a thirst amongst students for discussion on the major political and social issues affecting working people across the world.

Not a semblance of such a politically-charged atmosphere could be found in Thursday night’s meeting. An extraordinary degree of parochialism and self-satisfaction meant that the danger of militarism and imperialist war received barely a mention. Growing social inequality was dealt with only in so far as it enabled the respective speakers to press their nationalist agendas. Indeed the “vision” of an independent Scotland outlined by the three contributors was one in which the pressing concerns of working people and students were largely

sidelined.

Rosemary Burnett, formerly the Scotland programme director for Amnesty International, did not even mention Iraq in her contribution. The Scottish Greens are in favour of independence from England and Wales she said, and supported the SNP’s proposal to hold a referendum “to allow people to decide.” Independence was necessary because Scotland needed powers over key areas, such as tax and benefits, energy and broadcasting.

Scotland was a world leader in renewable energy, but the industry had gone to Portugal “where the government is more sympathetic” she complained.

“Do you know where the food you eat in hospital comes from”, Burnett asked the audience in outraged tones? “Wales”. The Scottish Greens would encourage local business and ensure that people ate food produced locally and local authorities sourced their food supplies and materials locally. Businesses that “gave back to the local community” should be rewarded, she continued, with tax breaks.

Alex Neil for the SNP followed. Formerly an economic consultant, Neil is now convenor of the Scottish parliament’s enterprise and culture committee.

All power currently held by the Westminster parliament in London should be repatriated to Scotland so that it can run its own affairs, although practically it was important that Scotland be part of the European Union, he said. This is crucial for the SNP, because independence is the means through which it hopes to be able to make its own relations directly with big business and the ruling elites across Europe.

There would still be a British dimension to some aspects of Scottish affairs but the mechanism for dealing with these would be through a Council of the Isles, similar to that which regulates relations between the Nordic countries, he said.

Scotland was one of the richest countries in the world,

Neil asserted, with the largest oil and gas reserves in the whole of Europe but is unable to reap the advantages because of its union with England. He claimed that Scottish independence would be beneficial to all because by encouraging economic investment it would help tackle child poverty and it would give Scotland control of its own defence and foreign policy. Had it had such power, it would never have become embroiled in an illegal war, he concluded.

The final speaker, Jim McVicar of the SSP, was at pains to outdo the SNP speaker in his enthusiasm for Scottish independence. The SSP want a “parliament elected by the people of Scotland”, he said. The Scottish people were no longer prepared to “put up with the crumbs from the table that Westminster has given us”.

Outlining what he described as a “radical programme of change”, he said that if elected the SSP would seek a referendum on independence within one year of the new parliament. This would be the first time in 300 years (i.e. since the Act of Union which brought together Scotland, England and Wales) that “the Scottish people will be able to determine their own destiny”.

The May 3 elections are “independence elections”, McVicar said. “If you don’t want to vote for the SSP,” he said, “vote for one of the other pro-independence parties”.

“We have an opportunity at these elections to change the way Scotland is run,” he continued. “If you agree with independence then go out and campaign for it.”

In the short question and answer session that followed, this writer intervened to denounce the SSP’s attempts to dress-up its support for independence and the SNP in socialist colours.

“The Socialist Equality Party is standing in the elections to the Scottish parliament”, she said. “We are opposed to all forms of nationalism—whether Scottish, English, German, French or otherwise. It is impossible for working people to defend their jobs, living standards and democratic rights in a global economy unless they organise across national borders in a common struggle against the profit system that is the source of war and social inequality.”

“The campaign for Scottish independence is a deliberate diversion from that struggle. Rather than establishing class unity, it is aimed at dragooning workers in Scotland behind the policy of national unity with big business.”

“The SNP is proposing that corporation tax in an independent Scotland be cut by eight percent—a level that not even Prime Minister Tony Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown would dare to propose because everyone

knows it would have catastrophic consequences for workers’ living standards.”

Addressing McVicar she said, “Your socialism is a fraud. You have made clear that the SSP will work in an alliance with the SNP, a big business party committed to massive cuts in corporate taxes. This means you accept responsibility for imposing these measures on the working class. You cannot do so and claim that your organisation has anything to do with socialism. It’s time to stop the pretence. Why don’t you bite the bullet and join the SNP?”

McVicar responded indignantly, whilst casting apologetic glances at the SNP speaker whom he referred to throughout as “Alex.” The SSP would not join a coalition with a pro-capitalist party, he replied, but would decide “on an issue by issue basis” whom to support—a coalition by any other name. Whilst claiming the SSP stood for international links between workers, McVicar insisted that the main issue was for Scotland’s “right to self-determination”.

Neil defended the SNP’s economic policies. Ireland had cut corporation tax to twelve-and-a-half percent, he said, and as a result “workers are flooding back” to the country. He did not mention that most of these are from Eastern Europe and are subject to super-exploitation by the transnational corporations.

Another member of the SEP again challenged the speakers on the Iraq war, asking the SSP to explain how the national division of the working class, which it advocated could be anything other than an obstacle to the necessary development of an international movement against imperialist militarism.

All that McVicar could offer by way of reply was to insist that “Scotland has a separate culture, church and legal system that cannot be integrated into the British state.”

The meeting concluded with the three parties discussing earnestly how a referendum on independence should be worded. This had to be very carefully thought out, they insisted, because it must be “legally defended.” If it was considered to go beyond the remit of the Scottish parliament, the “constitutional court could rule the question illegal and invalid”.



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