

Solidarity and the Scottish Socialist Party: Programmes for a capitalist Scotland

Chris Marsden, Julie Hyland
19 April 2007

This article is available as a PDF leaflet to download and distribute

The longer the campaign for the May 3 elections to the Scottish parliament has gone on, the more the claims to socialism by Tommy Sheridan's Solidarity and the Scottish Socialist Party have been exposed as false.

Their entire perspective rests on the claim that socialism is impossible, at least in the foreseeable future. Both have embraced Scottish nationalism by portraying independence as a necessary and desirable first step—the only means through which working people have even the remotest chance of defending their social conditions and stopping the drive towards war.

They declare their ultimate goal to be a Scottish Socialist Republic, but employ such rhetoric to conceal a programme that differs from the old-style Labour Party only in as much as the reforms it proposes are less far-reaching than those carried out in 1945 and confined to Scotland. And, as the SSP makes clear, a Scottish socialist republic “is a long term goal. In the short term, we can take a mighty leap forward towards that goal by breaking free of the suffocating stranglehold of the British state.”

A referendum, which it insists must take place within 100 days of the new parliament taking office, is described by Solidarity as making a “start in extending democratic participation and decision making in a meaningful sense right here; right now” and providing “a direct mechanism to allow the people of Scotland a say on whether we want to run our own country as a full, sovereign and independent nation.”

There are so many unstated assumptions in this scenario.

All the problems facing Scotland are attributed to rule from Westminster. It is certainly the case that for almost three decades the working class has suffered a constant erosion of its living standards and democratic rights. Britain is led by a prime minister who declares his indifference to the will of the electorate to be a virtue.

But why does this supposedly translate into an argument for independence? The need to address a democratic deficit and to fight social inequality is a basic requirement of workers on both sides of the Scottish-English border. Moreover, neither Solidarity nor the SSP offer any explanation as to why the creation of a separate Scotland and rule from Holyrood would be any more democratic than that which it replaces, from the fundamental standpoint of the class interests of working people.

Everything south of the border is portrayed as an undifferentiated reactionary mass or a lost cause. The SSP complains that under the existing constitutional arrangements, “we always get the choice of Middle England.”

There is not a word about the attacks on the working class in England and Wales, the mass opposition to war, as manifested in the million-strong demonstration in 2003 or the fact that Labour, has been reduced to a rump in all inner-city areas.

To the extent that Solidarity or the SSP ever mention workers in England and Wales it is to claim that these supposedly politically less-developed layers who are currently incapable of breaking the grip of the right-wing middle classes will be inspired by the pioneering example of a

Scotland free of the British state.

Moreover, they argue, anything that weakens the British state must automatically be progressive.

In contrast, what amounts to a free pass is given to the bourgeoisie in Scotland and all its parties. Not once does the SSP or Solidarity address the actual character of an independent Scotland. Their claims of national oppression, advocacy of cultural nationalism and denunciations of the undemocratic character of the Act of Union—drawn up 300 years ago—for not taking into account the views of Scottish workers has no historical or contemporary validity.

The Scottish bourgeoisie is part of an imperialist ruling elite, and the SNP has declared its intention to establish a 20,000-strong Scottish Defence Force after separation. Despite their tactical opposition to the Iraq war, this is a pledge of Scottish participation in future imperialist adventures organised through either the United Nations or the European Union.

As far as the SSP and Solidarity are concerned the only thing that matters is that Holyrood would give them access to the corridors of power. Their claim that independence is the route to socialism boils down to little more than an argument that Tommy Sheridan and Colin Fox and as many of their co-thinkers as possible become MSPs.

It is an essential political responsibility of socialists to explain to working people that even should they win a majority in a capitalist parliament, this would not amount to socialism. Rather this requires a root and branch transformation of economic life that can only be carried out by the political mobilisation of the working class and the creation of entirely new mechanisms of rule.

Not for nothing has the Marxist movement historically defined an uncritical and worshipful approach to the institutions of the bourgeois state as “parliamentary cretinism.” It hardly needs stating that Sheridan is a prime example of such a specimen, but his glorification of Holyrood is shared by friend and foe alike.

It is worth drawing attention to an op-ed piece in the *Sunday Mail* by the SSP's Rosie Kane. Writing of the suspension of parliament for the election campaign, Kane complains that there is a one-sided view of Holyrood and its politicians.

“Holyrood and its MSPs have been responsible for some terrific work that seems to slip by largely unnoticed.

“It's easy to slag politicians off and we should learn from constructive criticism and justifiable concerns. But there has to be a little sweet to match the sour.

“*Our party* is still a child, it's only eight years old. Sure mistakes have been made as we get used to devolution but I have to say we do a heck of a lot better than most.” [Emphasis added]

Neither of the two parties seriously believe they will form a majority in “our party,” and their left nationalist rhetoric ends in a whimper. They accept that Scotland is not ready for socialism and that therefore, the supposedly vital step of independence will proceed on the basis of

capitalism. No matter that their proposed referendum on independence requires the approval of the SNP, the Greens and other avowedly capitalist parties and will make no pretence at offering an economic and social alternative to Scottish workers.

The acceptance of the profit system as the basis for independence informs and shapes the vast bulk of the policies the SSP and Solidarity advance.

Their programme holds out the possibility of only those reformist measures that fall within the existing powers of Holyrood and which would not prevent an alliance with the other pro-independence parties—above all the SNP.

Solidarity's supposedly practical programme for government includes a proposal to take public transport back into "public ownership." However, once again even this is to be in two-stages: the establishment of a "not-for-profit company at the first available opportunity, as the first stage to bringing all of our public transport under democratic public ownership in an independent socialist Scotland." It denounces what it describes as the "failed Labour top down paternalist experiments of the past" and speaks instead of the state dispersing "grants to local not-for-profit businesses and Social Enterprises."

The SSP also calls for a "not-for-profit" transport system, to be achieved in four stages and culminating in the "transfer [of] the Scotrail franchise, when it expires in 2011, to a new publicly owned Scottish National Rail company."

The use of the term "not-for-profit" company, which is also used by Solidarity with respect to Scotrail, leaves open the place of these entities in an otherwise capitalist economy. The SSP's pledge that Scotrail will not be transferred until after 2011, is meant to honour existing obligations to the major shareholders and to avoid any demand that would bring Holyrood into conflict with corporate interests.

Similar formulations can be found in the manifestos of the SNP, the Greens and, for that matter, the Labour Party. Chancellor Gordon Brown has established a department to encourage not-for-profit organisations and Social Enterprise under the leadership of his multi-millionaire friend and former venture capitalist Sir Ronald Cohen.

What is essential in these schemes is that the responsibility of the state to provide adequate social welfare measures is handed over to non-governmental organisations of various descriptions, including religious bodies, community organisations, charities and specifically created private businesses.

Labour too justifies what is essentially another form of privatising public provision with denunciations of old-style statist or top-down social measures and claims that it this is a more democratic model.

What further exposes the socialist pretensions of Solidarity and the SSP is that their plans for transport, which both place at the centre of their manifestos, appear to have been worked out in Holyrood—in discussion with the Labour administration!

At the weekend, the *Herald* revealed that a "not-for-profit firm [could be] running tracks, stations and trains" in four years! Executives at "Network Rail, the quasi-public concern that already runs rail infrastructure, have discussed operating passenger services as well. A senior company official has held informal talks on the proposal with one of the Labour Party's most influential policy makers ... Any change would take place when the ScotRail franchise, currently held by First Group, expires in 2011."

For all their demands for the break-up of the British state, Solidarity and the SSP are the most unabashed defenders of a nascent Scottish state and its institutions. There is no surprise in this. Both originate in the Militant tendency in Britain, which for decades buried itself in the Labour Party and mis-educated tens of thousands of workers and youth with the claim that Labour could be transformed into a socialist party and socialism could be achieved through an "enabling act" in Westminster.

The SSP was formed because this rotten perspective ended in disaster. Kicked out of the Labour Party and having witnessed its transformation into an openly right-wing, British version of neo-conservatism, the SSP's response was to embrace nationalism, adapt itself to the devolved governmental institutions set up by Blair to encourage national divisions and regional competition and cosy up to the SNP—boosting it as it a new social-reformist party that must now be pressurised to the left.

The one form of independence that Solidarity and the SSP are implacably opposed to is the political independence of the working class from the bourgeoisie and its parties.

There is another formulation in the SSP's manifesto with serious implications for working people. It states that in an independent Scotland the SSP would campaign for "A new relationship with the European Union which would safeguard Scotland's independence."

What does this mean? The historic standpoint of socialists towards the European Union has been irreconcilably hostile. The EU is a capitalist institution with the central aim of establishing a continent-wide trade and military bloc of European powers in order to compete effectively against the United States, Japan, China and India.

It is a matter of principle to counterpose to the EU—i.e., the Europe of big business—the United Socialist States of Europe—i.e., a Europe of the working class.

For the SSP—Sheridan does not even bother to mention Europe—the EU must also be accommodated to because the perspective of independence is bound up with Scotland's transformation into an investment location for companies seeking access to the continental market that can rival Ireland. The SNP, because it is in the business of government, makes this explicit with its demand for a massive cut in corporation tax and for Scotland to emulate the Celtic Tiger.

The SSP and Solidarity cannot afford to be so candid. But one must recall they have both demanded that Glasgow be given EU objective one status so that it can receive subsidies. On the one hand they denounce Scottish dependence on the "crumbs" from Westminster, whilst in the other they hold out the begging bowl to Brussels.

The SSP and Solidarity are at pains to rubbish anyone who might suggest that a divorce from the rest of the UK would provoke a hostile and possibly even military response—even though billions are at stake in the form of North Sea oil reserves and other assets, not to mention military infrastructure that includes the nuclear bases at Faslane. They insist that there are no lessons to be learned from the tragic experiences workers have made with nationalism, whether this be the collapse of the Soviet Union or ethnic conflicts in the Balkans, Africa and elsewhere.

But given that nationalism has such a terrible legacy, one must ask whether the demand that the EU "safeguard" Scottish independence includes sending in peacekeepers to patrol the Scottish border and possibly a demilitarised zone stretching to Carlisle?

In any event, there is nothing fundamental to distinguish the perspective of Solidarity and the SSP from that of regionalist and separatist formations of an explicitly right-wing character such as Italy's Northern League and Belgium's Vlaams Belang. The demands for independence do not reflect left-wing sentiment in the working class, but an attempt to divert such sentiment into reactionary channels that serve the interests of capital.

The real driving force for independence in Scotland, as in other European regions, comes from sections of capital that see opportunities to make their own relations with global corporations and institutions such as the EU.

Independence now finds its staunchest support from Scotland's financial sector, which has become a major international player and is in direct competition with the City of London. It is a movement not of oppressed workers but of privileged bourgeois elites. One of the major reasons that it is attractive to the SSP and Solidarity is that in the comfortable environs of Holyrood, the Social Enterprises they now

champion and in the apparatus of Scotland's trade unions, they could share in the spoils that will accrue from the creation of such a "tartan tiger" economy.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact