

SEP candidate speaks at election meeting on Scottish island of Arran

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Socialist Equality Party candidate for the West of Scotland Regional List Robert Skelton addressed a recent meeting in Brodick on the island of Arran. He spoke against seven other candidates seeking election to the Scottish Parliament on May 3. The others participating included candidates from Labour, the Scottish National Party, the Conservatives, the Scottish Socialist Party, the Scottish Jacobite Party, the UK Independence Party and an independent Scottish nationalist.

Arran is a popular holiday destination. Although the permanent population is only 5,000, the island attracts large numbers of visitors from Britain and around the world. The economy is almost entirely based on tourism and farming, relying on low paid labour. There are also significant numbers of retirees and second home owners, drawn to the island's natural beauty.

Access to the island is by a 55-minute ferry journey, the cost and timing of which impacts on all aspects of life. Housing costs are also a serious problem. One of the local papers advertised service jobs in one of the local hotels at £6.51 an hour, alongside property ads offering pleasant cottages for £245,000.

The meeting, hosted by the Arran Council of Voluntary Services, offered candidates three minutes to introduce themselves and their programme. An audience of around 40 voluntary workers, parents, young people and pensioners attended.

Skelton was the only speaker to raise the dangers of war and the central questions facing workers. In his opening remarks he said,

“At the centre of our programme is the struggle against war. The support of the Labour government for the US led illegal war and occupation of Iraq is, to quote our manifesto, the ‘biggest single crime of the Blair government.’ The war has led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children and has turned that country into a living nightmare.

“As the British section of an international party, the Fourth International founded by Leon Trotsky, the Socialist Equality Party opposes all forms of nationalism and seeks to

unite workers in Britain and throughout Europe against the war in Iraq and the drive to war now underway against Iran. The daily threats now being made against Iran underscore the necessity for a struggle against war.

“We call for a revival of the anti-war movement on internationalist foundations and insist that the struggle against war is bound up with the struggle to put an end to the capitalist profit system that produces it.

“The war being waged in Iraq is being waged by the same profit system that attacks the living standards and conditions of the working class on a daily basis.

“The SEP articulates the social and political interests of the working class and explains that the social conditions and democratic rights of the working class can only be defended by the working class.

“The SEP call for the reorganisation of society on a socialist basis - that is for the re-organisation of economic life to meet the social needs of the vast majority of the world's population and not the interests of a handful of billionaires and multi-millionaires.”

Skelton delineated the SEP's perspective from that of the left nationalist parties: “In these elections we have been asked why there are so many Socialist parties and why should we vote for you instead of them. In answering this question we explain that it is only the Socialist Equality Party that fights on the basis of a genuinely socialist programme—an *internationalist programme*—that unites working people in Britain with their class brothers and sisters throughout the globe.

“Both Solidarity and the Scottish Socialist Party have declared that the main issue in these elections is the question of Scottish independence. The SEP opposes such nationalist conceptions and oppose all those who portray Scottish nationalism or any other form of nationalism or regionalism as the way forward.”

He concluded, “A vote for the SEP in this election is a declaration of political opposition to all those who defend the profit system and insists that, as ever, socialism must wait. It is not a protest vote but a pledge to the future.”

The Scottish Socialist Party's Davy Landels put forward a reformist perspective, based on the SSP's parliamentary record in Holyrood. The Scottish nationalist Jacobite Party candidate John Black complained that the roads and schools were bad.

Labour Party candidate and sitting MSP Allan Wilson claimed he stood on his record, and dealt exclusively on local issues of housing, ferry services and fishing. He was the only one of the candidates whose initial remarks were met with complete silence.

Conservative candidate Philip Lardner concentrated exclusively on his personal biography. The SNP's Kenny Gibson outlined aspects of the SNP's programme for funding local government and reassured big business that the SNP aimed to provide "competent effective" government. Paul Henke of the UK Independence Party listed complaints against the European Union and promised to "scream blue murder." Former SNP member Campbell Martin tried to present himself as a man of the people free from having to tow a party line. He then proceeded to shadow the SNP platform in his remarks.

Questions posed to the candidates concerned ferry services and specific social facilities on the island—early learning services, the secondary school, hospital and the post offices. With the ongoing privatisation of mail services, parcel deliveries to the island, formerly at the same rate as anywhere in the UK, were either more expensive or simply not available.

One questioner complained of the national lottery's unstable funding of social provisions that voluntary organisations depend on. Skelton said, "I am a full time carer for a family member with severe mental health problems. The transfer of services to the voluntary sector is appalling. The central ethos of the post war welfare service is that they were provided by the government. These have been decimated by New Labour."

One questioner asked that all the candidates explain their position on the Labour government's proposed replacement of the Trident strategic nuclear weapons system, based only a few miles away. The replacement proposal would update and modernize Britain's nuclear weapons system. Trident submarines frequently make their appearance off the island's shores en route to and from operational patrols.

The Conservative candidate unambiguously supported replacement, in the process hailing the World War Two Spitfire fighter plane as a fine example of private enterprise.

Labour's Wilson, aware that the Trident system is massively unpopular but that his party and the Blair government support it, avoided answering the question, saying the decision could be delayed for at least four years.

The SNP's Kenny Gibson complained that Trident's

firing codes were in Washington and therefore that the deterrent was not independent. Outlining a military policy for an independent Scotland as a minor imperialist power, he explained that under the SNP, Scotland would not host Trident, and any money saved could be spent on Scottish armed forces, "or whatever Scotland wanted."

The SSP speaker opposed Trident's replacement along similar lines to the SNP, again complaining that the firing button was in America and noting a Scottish Trades Union Congress report containing suggestions for redeploying workers at the Faslane nuclear base near Helensburgh.

Skelton quoted part of the SEP's manifesto, which reads, "The SEP stands for a socialist foreign policy, based on international working class solidarity. We demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all British and foreign troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. Billions of dollars must be paid to the peoples of both countries for compensation and reconstruction. The architects of the war—in London and Washington—must be placed on trial for war crimes.

"We call for an end to the military exploits of British imperialism around the globe; the immediate dismantling of NATO and the closure of all American bases in Europe; the cancellation of Trident and other nuclear weapons programmes; and the conversion of Britain's vast arms industry to socially useful production. The armed forces and security services must be replaced by defence organizations answerable to the democratic will of the people."

Over the course of the evening, the SSP's Landels increasingly adapted his comments to Skelton's analysis of social inequality and the roots of the war danger in the capitalist profit system. At one point he, rather shamefacedly, confessed that he too opposed capitalism. But it is a mark of thoroughly unprincipled and dishonest character of the SSP that never once in the course of a two hour meeting did Landels mention the SSP's basic, and divisive, programmatic demand—Scottish independence. This was left to the SNP, with whom the SSP are in a *de facto* separatist alliance.

SEP manifestos were sold after the event, and two people who had previously received the SEP election mailing said they were pleased to have the opportunity to find out more.



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