

Scottish Socialist Party election manifesto—a nationalist diatribe

Julie Hyland
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In the last weeks, the Socialist Equality Party has been campaigning to build support for its party lists in the West of Scotland and South Wales Central for the May 3 elections. In Scotland, one is struck by the extent to which the media, the opposition parties and the powers that be more generally attempt to pass off right-wing nostrums as progressive and even socialist.

That it should make such an attempt is thanks to the role played by groups such as the Scottish Socialist Party, who seek to divert the deep-going hostility to the Blair Labour government and as yet inchoate left-wing sentiment into the dead end of Scottish nationalism.

The SSP describes itself as the party which has “refashioned socialism” for the twenty-first century. But as a reading of its manifesto “People not Profit” makes clear, it is attempting to revive in an even more grotesque form the same type of national reformist policies which have so catastrophically failed when applied in the framework of much larger and better-resourced states due to the impact of globalised production. Policies, moreover, that gave rise to the very nationalist and pro-capitalist policies of the old workers movement that find their most finished expression in the Blair government.

In launching its manifesto on Tuesday, the SSP became the second nominally socialist party to proudly declare its eagerness to collaborate with the pro-business Scottish National Party (SNP) in the new parliament, after Tommy Sheridan had indicated that Solidarity, his split-off from the SSP, was ready to work constructively with the nationalists should they gain control as anticipated.

Like Solidarity, Scottish independence is at the centre of the SSP’s manifesto. The SSP pledges to introduce a bill for a referendum on Scottish independence during the lifetime of the new parliament.

“Scotland is calling time on the 300-year-old Union [with England and Wales],” it declares. Its support for the break-up of the United Kingdom, it assures its audience, has nothing “to do with anti-English sentiment”. Rather, an independent Scotland “would have full control over its foreign policy and where and how it deploys its soldiers” and would pull “its” troops out of Iraq and never again commit to an illegal war.

The SSP make barely any reference to the class character of

the war against Iraq as the outcome of efforts by two of the world’s leading capitalist powers to reassert their hegemony over strategic resources in the face of their international rivals. A single denunciation of “imperialist adventures” appears on page 48 of the 57-page document. Instead the SSP portrays the Iraq war essentially as the result of the “Union.”

It is not the British bourgeoisie, north and south of the border, but the “Union that drags us into illegal, immoral wars, from Flanders fields to the white heat of Helmand,” it states, and the “Union that offers tax breaks to corporations and the rich, while screwing the poor and forcing them into low-wage, short-term, soulless, meaningless jobs.”

The SSP accept that an independent Scotland would, in its initial stages at least, be a capitalist country. “The SSP is striving to create an independent, nuclear-free, multi-cultural, Scottish socialist republic,” it states. “That 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.”

This is to reduce imperialism to a policy choice, rather than the objective outcome of the nation-state system based on private ownership of the means of production. It conceals the fact that even were Scotland to become formally independent, its status would be that of a very minor imperial power, piggy-backing on the military adventures of its larger neighbour, or striking political alliances with various rival European powers. To claim that the Scottish bourgeoisie, which has shared in every war of imperialist plunder alongside its English counterparts, has changed its spots is a fraud.

Behind the disavowal of chauvinism, the SSP’s own advocacy of national “identity” is explicit. It insists that “wrenching ourselves free of this dysfunctional relationship [the Union] will do us, and England, the world of good,” because, “In re-establishing our identity, as Scots, as socialists, as members of an international community that stretches from pole to pole, we enable the English, the Welsh and Irish to do so.”

Just what constitutes this Scots “identity”—or that of the English, Welsh and Irish for that matter—the SSP does not say. And it never explains since when “re-establishing” a particular national identity has been considered a socialist aim.

Beyond the vague references to socialism at some future point, what is there to distinguish between the SSP's advocacy of national "identity" as the basis for the nation state, and that of Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the Lega Nord in Italy, or the communalist politicians in the former Yugoslavia, Africa and throughout the world that have dragged workers into fratricidal conflict time and again?

Any reader with a grasp of history will shudder at the SSP's perverted version of "international solidarity," which amounts to encouraging workers in Ireland and England to follow Scotland's pioneering efforts at cultural nationalism. The SSP and others seek constantly to paint Scottish nationalism in glowing colours and to deny that the terrible consequences of nationalism for the working class elsewhere apply to its Tartan manifestation. Now, after a civil war stretching for 35 years, we are told that Irish nationalism and, heaven forbid, English nationalism are also to be given a seal of approval.

Like all political opportunists, what really animates this party—and its rival Solidarity—is the benefits it hopes to derive from the Scottish parliament (which it describes as "our Parliament"). In this, it follows entirely in the tradition of other petty-bourgeois nationalist currents for which separatism is the means by which they and a section of the regional bourgeoisie seek to make their own relations directly with the transnational corporations, the World Bank and the European Union. The divisions amongst working people that result from this are not simply dismissed, but positively embraced as this will enable the resulting national formation to more effectively market "its" working class as the more globally competitive.

Growing support for the pro-independence parties in Scotland means that the current ruling Labour-Liberal coalition will likely be defeated in the May poll, the SSP states, with the result that "Small parties such as the SSP could then punch well above their weight politically."

This will enable it to build "cross-party support inside the parliament" for a range of policies, at the forefront of which is a referendum on independence within one year. Nothing else is as important for these ostensible socialists as the demand for some classless "Scottish people" to enjoy a purely constitutional independence from England and Wales, even if this is on the basis of capitalism.

They declare: "Through independence, we become ourselves." This is a deliberate attempt to invoke Ireland's Sinn Fein, which, in its efforts to advance a nationalist agenda behind left phrases, it resembles far more than any genuinely socialist tendency. And at least Ireland suffered genuine national oppression when Sinn Fein adopted this clarion call at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Outside of this pledge, the remainder of the SSP's manifesto is a 450-strong shopping list of limited reforms, which the *Scotsman* reports were compiled "using the latest 'Wiki' technology."

The SSP is at pains to reassure the reader that many of its

proposals are well within the powers of the Scottish parliament to grant. Indeed, so carefully costed are the measures proposed that even as regards Scotrail, the SSP states that the existing franchise should only be transferred to "a new publicly owned Scottish National Rail company" when the existing licence "expires in 2011."

Presumably, workers should ensure that none of their demands run foul of existing commercial contracts and other laws relating to private ownership lest the SSP propose they also be put on the back-burner.

So concerned is the SSP to make clear it will be bound by the legal and monetary framework of the Scottish parliament that it stipulates which of its demands are permissible within the current devolved structures. Its proposal for "Mandatory parking fines for those non-disabled badge holders who misuse disabled parking bays" is, whereas "full trade union rights and protection for farm workers" is not.

It has even discovered a legal loophole enabling its proposal for free public transport to be established by the devolved parliament. "Even within the constraints imposed by devolution, there are various ways of funding a free public transport system," it states. "Because a new public transport system would mainly come under the control of local authorities ... any funding for public transport would be designated a supplementary local tax, and therefore would fall within the powers devolved to Holyrood."

The SSP suggest as a possible funding option "A 'transport payroll tax' on all businesses with more than 10 employees.... This transport payroll tax could be offset against Corporation Tax."

The question arises, after reading such a manifesto, as to why the SSP or Solidarity remains organisationally distinct from the SNP. Objectively their demands and their programme define them as ginger groups on the larger nationalist formation. Both parties have taken the thousands of working people and youth who have voted for them and even put them in Holyrood in 2003 based on their socialist claims and have done their best to lead them by the nose into the political clutches of Alex Salmond and company.



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