Scotland: Minority SNP government seeks pro-business “consensus”

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The Scottish National Party (SNP) formed a minority administration last Wednesday when its leader Alex Salmond was voted into office as first minister, the head of the devolved government in Scotland.

With 47 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), the SNP is well short of a majority in the 129-seat Scottish Parliament at Holyrood. He was supported in the vote by the two MSPs from the Green Party.

This is the first time that the SNP, which calls for Scottish withdrawal from the United Kingdom, has been the largest party in Scotland.

Labour, whose 50-year reign as the largest party in Scotland was ended by the May 3 election, nominated its leader Jack McConnell as first minister, but with only 46 votes was unable to beat Salmond. The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, with 17 and 16 MSPs, respectively, abstained in the vote, enabling the SNP to form a minority government.

Making his acceptance speech in Holyrood, Salmond was at pains to emphasise the “Scottish national interest” and the need for “consensus.” Brushing aside the divisions between the parties over independence that had dominated the election campaign, he insisted that Scotland had a unifying sense of identity: “We have a sense of ourselves, a sense of community and, above all, a sense of the ‘common weal’ of Scotland.”

Beyond this nationalist humbug, Salmond was making an appeal to the other parties in Holyrood on whom he will rely over the next four years. He stated that he would “appeal for support, policy by policy, across this chamber.”

In particular, the SNP are looking for backing from the Liberal Democrats, who have refused to join Salmond in a coalition government because of their opposition to holding a referendum on independence. Appealing to the Liberals, who favour increasing the powers of the devolved parliament, Salmond stated that “there is a broad consensus on the need for this parliament to assume greater responsibility for the governance of Scotland.”

Due to its minority status, the SNP administration is unlikely to advance its separatist agenda too vociferously at this point, preferring to use the demand for independence as a bargaining tool for increased powers at Holyrood.

The *Scotsman* newspaper commented May 17 that “to satisfy his party” Salmond would propose a white paper on independence. In the meantime, the SNP’s main aim would be “seeking consensus on more powers for Holyrood” and perhaps urging “Westminster [the UK parliament] to hand responsibility for oil and gas to Scotland.”

Most urgent for Salmond is to honour the SNP’s commitment to push through major tax breaks for big business—a pledge supported by nearly all the parties—while retaining the allocation of a relatively high level of funding granted to Scotland by the UK Treasury.

The Greens, who also favour Scottish independence, have agreed to a de-facto but somewhat loose coalition with the SNP, in which they are not formally obliged to vote for the SNP’s budget, or to support Salmond in a confidence motion. They have been given chairmanship of a parliamentary committee.

Paul Tetlaw, chairman of the environmental pressure group TRANSform, said the Greens had failed to gain any serious concessions on transport policy from the SNP. “By agreeing a deal with the SNP, they have chosen to side with a party committed to cancelling public transport projects in order to subsidise new road-building. Those who have worked so hard for improvements to our public-transport system to benefit the environment and public health will be saddened by the Greens’ decision,” said Tetlaw.

Greenpeace welcomed the SNP/Green alliance for its supposed potential to turn Scotland into a “world leader in

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renewable energy."

The Greens have sought a coalition with the SNP for several years, and were in serious negotiations with them in the run-up to the election. Salmond and Green leader Robin Harper have both called for an alliance of "progressive forces" in Holyrood, which is usually taken to include the Liberal Democrats, who have been in coalition with Labour for the last eight years. A spokesperson for the Greens criticised the Liberals' refusal to form a coalition with the SNP saying, "Even with only two MSPs, we're still prepared to talk but the Lib Dems seem to have gone off in a huff. It's very disappointing."

As well as the Greens and the Liberals, the SNP will look for support from the Conservatives and even Labour, especially for their policy of slashing local business tax from 27 percent to just 20 percent and increasing the number of police officers.

Despite the inability of the SNP to form a working majority with the Liberals, the tone in Holyrood was remarkably conciliatory, with all the party leaders congratulating Salmond and stating that they would strive to make the new parliament work.

The day after Salmond was voted into office the parliament voted to accept the SNP administration he nominated, consisting of five other senior ministers and 10 junior ones. The SNP and the Greens supported the vote with Labour, the Liberals and the Conservatives abstaining.

This is a reflection of the shared pro-big business agenda of all the parties. The SNP represents sections of business, including major financial institutions, who believe they would profit more by pulling out of the UK and establishing direct relations with transnational corporations and the European Union. But the party is in agreement with Labour, the Liberals and the Tories that in the meantime every effort should be made to cut taxes and public spending while increasing spending on "law and order" measures.

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