

Solidarity and the Scottish Socialist Party: What will follow from the collapse of the Scottish left?

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26 May 2007

The result of the May 3 elections to the Scottish Parliament has been a political catastrophe for radical left groups across Britain.

For almost a decade, these organisations had portrayed the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), with its six MSPs in Holyrood, as a role model for the left. Alongside Rifondazione Comunista (RC—Communist Refoundation) in Italy, it was cited as proof that an alliance of former Stalinists, ex-Labourites and the radical groups themselves—brought together on a programme of limited reforms—could present themselves as viable parliamentary parties. Such organisations would then be in a position to win representation in government, through which they could force the ruling class to abandon the neo-conservative agenda of war and social inequality.

Today, RC leader Fausto Bertinotti is regularly booed and jeered by protesters for his organisation's role in the big business government of Romano Prodi, which has included voting to support the deployment of Italian soldiers to Afghanistan.

In Scotland, the first major blow to this same opportunist perspective came in last year's bitter and ignominious split in the SSP. The focus for this was former SSP convenor Tommy Sheridan's decision to take legal action against the *News of the World* over its allegations of sexual impropriety on his part.

Following police raids on the SSP's headquarters to recover documents thought to be pertinent to the *NoW*'s defence, the court action saw the party divided over the newspaper's allegations, with each side publicly denouncing the other as liars. Having won the libel action, Sheridan set up his break-away Solidarity organisation, which is backed by the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party of England and Wales.

The second blow came on May 3, when the combined vote cast for Solidarity and the SSP fell by 100,000, erasing all their parliamentary representation in one go.

More than one month on, neither the SSP nor Solidarity has made any serious political appraisal of this event. For the most part, they attribute the collapse of their vote solely to the negative impact of the split, while continuing their campaign of mud-slinging along with gestures of defiance that barely conceal their abject demoralisation.

The SSP's Alan McCombes states that the results are “a massacre for the left,” a “serious setback for socialism” and “the day that Scotland's rainbow parliament was turned a drab prison grey.”

The so-called “red-green presence in Holyrood”—comprising the SSP, the Greens and Solidarity—was slashed from fifteen to just two. And though McCombes does not make this clear, it is now exclusively green!

“There is no single explanation for the debacle of May 3rd,” he continues, “The incineration of the left was the product of a combination of inflammable ingredients.” But he concentrates most of his fire on blaming Sheridan for the debacle, whose Solidarity organization “exposed itself as an embittered personality cult.”

He states that Sheridan had built up a “fairy tale” scenario in which he was the victim of a plot to remove him from the SSP leadership, based on “manufactured allegations” about his personal life and documents “forged” by the SSP leadership who then “conspired to pervert the course of justice and in order to destroy” him. This led many people to “lay the blame equally on both sides” and the SSP suffered accordingly.

Solidarity's approach is the mirror image of the SSP's. Many political commentators had expected Sheridan to be the only “left” that would retain his seat. Proclaimed throughout the media as Scotland's most “charismatic” politician, he received positive press coverage during the election and had even been cast as a potential “king-maker” in the new parliament.

With Sheridan and fellow MSP Rosemary Byrne both subsequently losing their seats, Solidarity has barely updated its web site and has made no political appraisal of its result, other than bombastic rhetoric as to the election having confirmed the group's place “as Scotland's leading party of the left” and “the only credible and viable socialist party in Scotland.”

To the extent that its losses are referred to at all, Solidarity also attributes it to “the circumstance in which we were formed, on the back of an acrimonious split from the SSP.” This meant it was “forced to fight this election on two fronts—against New Labour and their neoliberal agenda both at home and abroad, and against former socialists who have and continue to actively collude and collaborate with the establishment against” Sheridan.

Solidarity's reluctance to comment further can at least be partially accounted for by the fact that Sheridan's libel victory is being contested by the *News of the World*, and police are investigating the allegations of perjury. Recent reports claim that the police inquiry has now widened into allegations of witness tampering.

It is a measure of the animosity between the two organizations that the SSP views the police investigation as the source of its own salvation.

McCombes reassured his readers that not all is lost because the “stark facts” are that “Like Jeffrey Archer and Jonathan Aitken, two top Tory politicians who served lengthy jail sentences for their actions, Tommy Sheridan took out a libel action based on a fraud: at

least some of the material published in the trashy tabloid *News of the World* was substantially true.”

With the “removal of Tommy Sheridan from Holyrood, the Solidarity bubble will burst,” he continued, “allowing Scottish socialism to be rebuilt under the clean banner of the SSP.”

Such venom is in inverse proportion to the actual political differences between the SSP and Solidarity. Aside from being either for or against Tommy Sheridan, both organisations stood on exactly the same platform of minor social reforms within an independent Scotland.

There is no question that the unprincipled character of their split played a role in the electoral collapse of the SSP and Solidarity. But this was a result of the SSP’s miseducation of workers and youth over the preceding decade, in which it systematically blurred the differences between a genuinely socialist policy and Scottish nationalism.

McCombes is reluctantly forced to acknowledge the impact of the SSP’s glorification of nationalism on its performance. Aside from the role of Sheridan, the SSP’s loss of seats was an expression of the fact that “all of the smaller parties and independents were mangled in a classic political squeeze, in which two parties were running neck and neck. In this election, the drama was heightened by the fact that one of the two parties stands for dissolution of the United Kingdom, thus polarizing Scotland into two camps: pro and anti-union.”

This meant that “many left wing voters—including it appears most of those who voted SSP in 2003—swung behind the SNP in this election,” he continues.

This is a damning admission and one which points to the fundamental character of the crisis now facing the SSP and Solidarity.

The SSP was explicitly founded on the basis of advancing a Scottish road to socialism that would proceed directly through the devolved parliament at Holyrood. Casting Scottish nationalism as a progressive expression of nascent class hostility to capitalism, the SSP portrayed the SNP as a leftist party that it could work with to build popular momentum for independence from England and Wales and so pave the way for socialism.

In reality, the SNP’s protests over the Iraq war and support for minimal social reforms was window-dressing for its agenda of establishing an independent Scotland as a cheap-labour platform within Europe and a low-tax haven for international capital. The SSP’s political endorsement was therefore crucial in enabling this right-wing party to cultivate a base amongst sections of workers and youth, under conditions in which hostility to Labour across the UK had reached record proportions.

The SSP’s 300,000 votes in 2003 were a manifestation of this same hostility to Labour. But in the intervening period, the party and its offshoot Solidarity made abundantly clear that their role was essentially to act as a ginger group for the SNP and that it would be the main player in securing the primary goal of an independent Scotland.

Solidarity and the SSP both indicated their readiness to back the SNP in the new parliament. Both placed Scottish independence at the centre of their manifestos, competing with the SNP as to which of them would move most quickly to introduce a motion to this effect in Holyrood.

Both parties only stood on the regional lists, urging a vote for the “pro-independence” parties in the constituency elections. Solidarity’s press officer, Hugh Kerr, did his best to remove any trace of ambiguity by stating publicly that he would vote SNP. But in any

event, the message was received loud and clear by those who previously voted for the SSP. The results suggest that much of the vote won by the party in the constituencies in 2003 went over entirely to the SNP because this was seen as the best means of achieving the “main goal” of Scottish independence. And many of its supporters drew the same conclusion about how to vote in the regional lists. Consequently, the majority of seats gained by the SNP came at the expense of the left parties and the Greens, rather than Labour. (The Scottish Greens had also placed independence at the centre of their own campaign, and saw their tally of MSPs fall from five to two.)

The catastrophic result of this policy will only encourage Solidarity and the SSP to shift even further to the right.

Both organizations categorically reject the possibility of developing the political independence of the working class from the bourgeoisie and its apologists that is central to the socialist transformation of society.

For Solidarity, “Meaningful change in society for working class and oppressed people only ever comes as a result of mass movements and local campaigns in which the working class come together and *act to resist and put pressure on those in power*. In so doing they gain, *for however long*, a sense of their own strength, which when harnessed is an unstoppable force” (emphasis added).

To the extent that working people are to be politically mobilized at all, it is solely to place pressure on what Solidarity considers to be the real actors in society—“those in power.” The one force that is automatically excluded from power is the working class.

Commenting on the SNP result, Solidarity pledges, “Now we will see if their bellicose rhetoric [of being an ‘anti-establishment alternative to New Labour’] is translated into action. If it is then we will support them on these issues. If not, then they will be exposed.”

Given that the break-up of the UK is the *raison d’être* of both Solidarity and the SSP, all this means is that both organizations will seek to position themselves as even more nationalist than the SNP, sniping at its heels in order to pressurize it to act more decisively in furtherance of its reactionary aim of separation.

For his part, McCombes states with obvious regret that “the emergence of the SNP as the biggest party in Scotland by the narrowest possible margin will not lead to instant independence.” But it is nevertheless a welcome development that he insists “is likely to open up a new, turbulent phase in Scottish politics, a time of strife, which could accelerate the ultimate break-up of the United Kingdom and pave the way for a resurgence of socialism.”



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