

Scottish National Party publishes policy document on independence

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Last week, the Scottish National Party-led minority administration in the devolved Scottish parliament published its 40-page document, "Independence and responsibility in the modern world." It is the first document with a measure of official authority to back the separation of England and Scotland.

Billed as a "National Conversation" on Scotland's future, SNP leader Alex Salmond said his party was fulfilling its pledge during May's elections to the Scottish parliament at Holyrood to produce a paper on independence within its first 100 days in office.

The proposals on independence outlined in the document largely reiterate those in the SNP's manifesto. It also appends a draft proposal for a referendum on independence, in which Scottish voters will be asked to agree or disagree with the statement, "The Scottish Government should negotiate a settlement with the Government of the United Kingdom so that Scotland becomes an independent state."

The SNP-led administration is already setting down the markers for future independence. Salmond has called for the creation of an independent Scottish civil service and—as highlighted by the referendum question—has taken to describing the devolved administration as Scotland's "government." Before making his first official visit to England as Scotland's First Minister, he also visited Brussels—to build Scottish links with the European Union, and with the devolved administration in Northern Ireland.

The fact remains, however, that the SNP heads a minority administration with support for independence amongst Scots hovering around 30 percent. Thus, the paper focuses on what it says are the two other options to outright independence: the status quo or a further devolution of central powers.

That the document considers possibilities other than outright separation has been hailed in the British press as a sign of a more consensual approach by the SNP. But what is most apparent is not that the SNP is "slackening" in its commitment to independence, but that the official opposition parties have headed in its direction on the issue of greater powers for Holyrood.

The document begins with quote from Charles Stewart Parnell: "No man has a right to fix the boundary of the march of a nation; no man has a right to say to his country, 'Thus far shalt thou go and no further.'"

In truth, it is the SNP that is fixing the boundaries of a debate that is far removed from a supposed popular exercise in democracy, aimed at enabling Scots to determine their own future.

The document states that "as sovereign people, the people of Scotland—and we alone—have the right to decide how we are governed."

This claim of democratic legitimacy for a referendum has largely been accepted as good coin. To the extent that there is any difference on the referendum amongst many of Scotland's political parties, it largely centres on timing and wording.

The SNP has been able to utilise the discredited character of the other major parties—the Conservatives are still a rump, and in recent years,

Labour has hemorrhaged support north and south of the border—to counterpose a corrupt, right-wing Westminster to what it portrays as the birth of a new era in Scottish politics.

But the moves for the greater separation of England and Scotland do not stand in opposition to the rightward shift of official politics in Britain. They are the direct product of a process that has seen the genuine democratic and social aspirations of working people subordinated to the narrow, selfish considerations of big business and its petty bourgeois representatives.

The SNP champions separatism or at least greater autonomy in order to establish Scotland as a cheap labour platform with low corporate taxes that is antithetical to the interests of the great mass of working people on both sides of the border. Like so many separatist movements before it, the SNP wants to plug Scotland directly into the world market, in order to attract investment from major corporations seeking access to Europe in particular.

The document cites approvingly, "During the 20th century, over 150 new independent states were created, a large proportion through decolonisation and the break up of the former Communist states in central and eastern Europe."

Just what is being referred to here? Can anyone other than a bald-faced liar claim that the likes of Estonia, Lithuania and Ukraine, to name but a few, constitute "independent," "sovereign" countries in any meaningful sense? On the contrary, the period especially since the Iraq war has shown many of these newly "independent" states to be the political pawns of one or another Great Power.

The SNP's pretensions to independence are similarly bogus. In truth, it proposes to rip apart the framework of the UK, so as to place Scotland more firmly under the orbit of the European Union—the largesse of which it hopes will enable the creation of a more business-friendly environment.

To this end, the SNP has developed a truly extraordinary mishmash of policies seeking to ensure that Scotland, with its 5 million population, enjoys representation in the EU the same as or greater than it does presently as part of the United Kingdom. Thus, "Her Majesty The Queen would remain the Head of State in Scotland. The current parliamentary and political Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland would become a monarchical and social Union."

In the event of majority support for independence, transitional negotiations would be convened between England and Scotland that "would have to cover sharing the assets and liabilities of the United Kingdom between the remaining parts of the United Kingdom and an independent Scotland. These would include such matters as: apportionment of the national debt; allocation of reserved assets, such as the United Kingdom official reserves, the BBC, and overseas missions of the Foreign Office; future liabilities on public sector pensions, and social security benefits; the split of the defence estate and the equipment of the armed forces."

On this basis, Scotland would be able to continue in the EU "with an

equal status to the other member states” and as “a full member of the United Nations and other international bodies, such as the Commonwealth, the World Health Organisation, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the World Trade Organisation.”

It could also “develop its own voice” in the field of defence, the report states.

In part, the section outlining independence is so vague because the SNP knows that it is not an immediate prospect. But the report’s proposals for a further devolution of powers make plain the nationalists’ real concerns are solely those of big business. It states, “Devolution of taxation and spending responsibilities as a whole—commonly known as ‘fiscal autonomy’—would allow the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government to tailor the overall taxation regime to the levels of public expenditure considered appropriate to the needs of Scotland.”

Transferring responsibility for competition law to Scotland “could better reflect market needs and conditions, subject, of course, to European Union law in relation to competition.”

The “of course” is telling. While the SNP rails against Scotland’s supposed subordination to England, it is only too willing to accept the authority of the EU. Thus, the report presses for “Scotland to play a greater role in leading negotiations” in EU discussions and calls for the transfer of responsibility for the regulation of the financial services sector so as to “allow the Scottish sector to influence the European Union regime and reflect better specific Scottish circumstances.”

On matters of employment, trade union law and health and safety, the “Scottish Parliament could consider the balance between the rights of workers and the need for modern, flexible conditions of employment, and the proper level of minimum wages for all ages in the workforce.” The same considerations would enable it to determine rules for eligibility for benefits, pensions, etc.

In response to the report, Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives launched what they called a “pro-union alliance.” Salmond’s plans for independence were “divisive,” they said in a joint statement. Nevertheless, the three made clear that they want to be in on the “conversation,” and they have all indicated they will support greater powers for Holyrood. In marked contrast to Labour and Conservative statements prior to May’s election that devolution had gone far enough, the joint statement said, “We are willing to enter into debate jointly about the way in which devolution within the UK can best develop in the years to come.”

For the Liberal Democrats, a report prepared last year on constitutional reform, headed by former presiding officer and Liberal party leader David Steel, had called for a tranche of currently reserved powers to be transferred to Edinburgh.

And, as the document points out, it was the Labour government itself that began sweeping changes to the UK’s constitution, “with the referendums for devolution in Scotland and Wales, followed by reform of the House of Lords, devolution and a directly elected mayor in London,” changes to Welsh Assembly government and power-sharing in Northern Ireland.

The result has been the House of Lords stuffed with businessmen and political appointees—whose parties have no democratic mandate—while the creation of another tier of regionally based state apparatuses, paid for at public expense, has provided a niche for aspiring nationalist politicians to discuss the best means of achieving “fiscal” stability and international competitiveness. These “pioneering” efforts have, at the same time, been accompanied by ever more draconian legislation overturning fundamental democratic rights, a rise in social inequality and the mounting of a series of pre-emptive wars.

It is the degree to which such constitutional measures have been both the means to, and a disguise for, unpopular policies that has seen all the

parties sign up to Salmond’s “national conversation.”

The Conservatives’ response is typical of the political rotteness underlying the manoeuvres of all the official parties. Although initially opposed to devolution, the establishment of the Scottish Parliament based on proportional representation gave the Tories a stake in the country’s administration and policy-making at a time when its share of the vote has become negligible. The devolved institution is therefore crucial if the Tories are to have any official platform north of the border. Scottish Tory leader Annabel Goldie has signaled support for Holyrood gaining greater fiscal autonomy and has supported an “intelligent debate” on Scotland’s future.

But with much of its support confined to the Home Counties and shires south of the border, the Conservative Party is also exploiting proposals for Scottish independence to press for greater powers for England. Leading Conservatives have argued that any greater devolution of powers to Scotland should be matched by banning Scottish Members of Parliament from voting in Westminster on matters pertaining to England—a measure that would greatly undermine, if not wipe out entirely, Labour’s parliamentary majority.

The Labour Party mirrors this regional fracturing. Prime Minister Gordon Brown has let it be known that Labour will seek to “outmanoeuvre” the SNP by pressing for “the Scottish parliament to seek further powers to run Scotland’s domestic affairs.”

Within Scotland, Labour’s new parliamentary leader, Wendy Alexander, has said it is necessary to take a “fresh look” at relations within the UK and has signaled the party will seek to distance itself from London. At the same time, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), a pro-Labour thinktank, has called on Brown to cut the number of Scottish MPs and slash Scotland’s share of central spending so as to “assuage potential English anger,” the *Scotsman* reported. “Otherwise, the researchers warn, rising unhappiness in England could ultimately threaten the unity of the UK,” it continued.

The current debate underscores the politically criminal role played by the petty bourgeois radical organisations in Britain.

The run-up to May’s elections saw millions of workers in Scotland, England and Wales turn their backs on the Labour Party in disgust at its support for imperialist war abroad and big business policies at home. Rather than seeking to develop this nascent left-wing sentiment through a political struggle to make workers conscious of the need for the construction of a genuinely socialist and internationalist movement, the radical groupings functioned as cheerleaders for the nationalists.

The Scottish Socialist Party, Tommy Sheridan’s Solidarity and the Greens all portrayed the SNP as a left-wing alternative to Labour. Sheridan has said glowingly of the new SNP administration, “For the first time, Scotland has a nationalist government, and more importantly, a left-of-centre government.”

The SSP, whose website is infrequently updated, produced a statement welcoming Salmond’s “national conversation” with 48 hours of its unveiling.

“We believe Scotland would be economically, politically, culturally and socially better off making our own decisions and standing on our own two feet,” it said, stating that it would work with the SNP and others in the “major battle” ahead “to win the Scottish people decisively to the cause of Scottish independence.”

Just what they are trying to win Scottish workers to was made clear in the *Financial Times*. Any decision on the UK’s constitutional arrangements had to be determined by their benefits to big business, it insisted. “The real question is whether greater autonomy would allow Scotland to reduce its dependence on UK subsidy, and create the conditions for a more dynamic and resilient economy.”

Robert Crawford, former chief executive of Scottish Enterprise, has said, “We certainly need to be able to do something with taxes because

that's the best way of making a country competitive quickly. The use of corporation tax across Europe and the rest of the world has caused more investment into these economies and significant expansion by existing economies.”



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