Britain: Tommy Sheridan makes his pitch to the Scottish National Party

Steve James
31 July 2008

One question posed by the recent by-election in Glasgow East is just how long it will be before Tommy Sheridan joins the Scottish Nationalist Party?

Sheridan is the former leader the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and now heads the breakaway Solidarity, Scotland's Socialist Movement. The two parties split in September 2006, after Sheridan took out an ultimately successful defamation case against Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World*, over allegations that he attended a swingers club, which the SSP leadership refused to back. Both parties stood candidates in Glasgow East, which saw a humiliating defeat for Labour by the SNP with a 26.1 percent swing in what was Labour's 26th safest seat.

Solidarity was formed by Sheridan's closest allies within the SSP and backed by Scottish members of the Socialist Workers Party and the rival Committee for a Workers' International (CWI). With no programmatic differences between the two parties, support for Sheridan was based largely on the belief that his high profile would provide the best means of maintaining the influence won under his leadership by the SSP in the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, where it had six MSPs. In the event, neither party won enough votes in the 2007 May elections to gain a seat, and most of their support collapsed and went over to the SNP.

Sheridan even then made clear that he was in favour of an SNP victory. But the most striking feature of the Glasgow East by-election campaign waged by Sheridan is how he took every opportunity to make what amounted to a sales pitch on his own behalf, to the SNP.

During a BBC "Newsnight Scotland" roundtable interview of representatives of the smaller parties in the early stages of the campaign, Sheridan, speaking for Solidarity, opened his remarks by stating baldly, "If I am being absolutely honest, I hope the SNP would win rather than Labour. If we are honest, we are fighting for third place...."

Later, he returned to his theme, stating, "We're not going to win the election, we want to take third...but if you put me on the spot and say who would you rather win, I would rather Gordon Brown got a political kicking...."

Sheridan made no mention of his party's candidate, Tricia McLeish. While he made references to "big business parties," at no time did he make any explicit criticism of the SNP.

Sheridan's proposal that voters could give Gordon Brown "a kicking" by voting SNP dovetailed with the campaign of the SNP, which played down its demand for Scottish independence due to the unpopularity of the idea of independence with the working class.

Solidarity literature distributed during the campaign portrayed the party as left advisers to the SNP. A two-page article, "SNP in Power—One Year On," took up half of its free news sheet.

In this article, Phil Stott and Steve Arnott pledged that "Solidarity will continue to welcome positive reforms from the SNP and say why and when we don't think they go far enough; we will criticise the SNP when they put the interest of business and the wealthy before the interests of the majority of society, and we will point out consistently that it is the left leaning measures of the SNP that have so far also proved the most popular."

Arnott and Stott explicitly aim to build Solidarity as a left cover to the SNP, but Sheridan's uncritical praise for the SNP seems to be generating tensions within Solidarity.

At a Solidarity eve of poll meeting, in response to a question posed by myself, Sheridan made clear just how far removed he is from socialist politics.

In his speech, Sheridan noted that "the SNP is now the party of protest. SNP is to the left of Labour, so is Glasgow East."

Voters, Sheridan went on, should seek to pressure the SNP. They should ask the SNP, "...are you supporting public ownership of oil?"

Speaking from the audience, this writer noted that Sheridan had "highlighted bad social conditions in Glasgow. The same conditions hold in London, Liverpool, Sheffield, Newcastle, and Hartlepool. A unified struggle by working class in Britain against poverty, inequality, the consequences

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of war in Iraq, the attack on democratic rights, and all the policies of the social elite for whom Labour and the Tories speak, is needed. In what sense does your proposal of Scottish independence advance this?"

Sheridan replied with a forthright call for Scottish "nationhood" on the basis of capitalism. Echoing the SNP's long-standing perspective of "an independent Scotland in Europe," he stated that the European Union "has recently expanded to incorporate 10 new nations with a lower population than Scotland. Scotland has the economic strength to survive."

"Internationalism," he added, "is 'inter' and 'nationalism'...a collective of nationalisms".

Thus, rather than expressing the strivings of the working class to overcome national divisions and to take forward a world struggle for the replacement of the profit system, Sheridan's conception of "internationalism" is simply an alliance between the bourgeoisie of smaller regions and powers. This outlook defines his indifference towards the working class in the rest of Britain. His outlook is entirely nationalist. He concluded his reply by declaring, "I don't feel British or part of British imperialism.... Labour is a British party."

Sheridan has no similar reservations when identifying with a smaller imperialist nation, Scotland, and with the governing Scottish party, the SNP.

Commenting on the result in Glasgow East, Sheridan proclaimed, "This is a historic victory in Glasgow East for the SNP and I congratulate John Mason. Let us be clear it is a victory for a left of centre party which carries on Glasgow's radical tradition...."

Sheridan is a man with an eye on the main chance. He is someone who won the admiration of sections of the Scottish establishment during his years in the Scottish parliament for his tireless promotion of Holyrood. He clearly has aspirations to revive his parliamentary career. Initially, he is attempting to do that by aligning Solidarity as close as possible with the SNP and, should circumstances allow, by joining it and acting as its left face.

Sheridan is still facing perjury charges as part of the fallout from the libel case he pursued against Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World*. A major legal and police operation has subsequently been mounted against him for his humiliating defeat of the media giant for securing $200,000 compensation. Sheridan's insistence on fighting the case, against his own party's advice, split the SSP in two and saw SSP members giving evidence against him.

Defending the good name of "family man" Sheridan from lurid allegations was, clearly, more important to him than the very existence of his own party. For this was a question of maintaining "Brand Sheridan" and safeguarding his own future career.

The SSP, however, still has no differences of principle with Sheridan and Solidarity. Like Solidarity, the SSP proposes a "Scottish socialist republic" as a means to provide a platform for the social reforms once proposed by the Labour Party. Both parties support Scottish independence as proposed by the SNP as a necessary stage towards this goal.

Like Solidarity, the SSP bears full responsibility for the ability of the SNP to benefit from the collapse of the Labour Party, as expressed most dramatically in Labour's latest by-election disaster. They always refer to the split with him as "a tragedy," which prevented a more effective struggle for their own nationalist and reformist politics. Their struggle is reduced to which is the bigger and more viable vehicle for championing independence.

The SSP's analysis of the campaign, authored by Richie Venton, focused heavily on the fact that its candidate and former MSP Frances Curran polled a few more votes than Solidarity in Glasgow East—555 compared to 512. This was most important for them in reversing the relative position of the two parties last year.

However, their line was exactly the same as that of Solidarity. Venton sought to misrepresent the huge swing against the Labour Party as representing support for independence. He admitted that "There was not widespread, overt, explicit talk on the streets of this being a vote on independence." But then, echoing Sheridan and the SNP, he went on to assert that "it clearly is a clash of contrasting opinions on the Westminster Labour government compared to the Holyrood SNP government—and is a massive impetus towards independence."

The SSP will continue to make its occasional denunciations of Sheridan and decry the SNP as a capitalist party. But it cannot distance itself from that fact that he was the party's leader and public face for close to two decades. And it is within the opportunist and saltire waving milieu of the SSP that Sheridan's politics germinated and bore fruit. As to his current allies in the SWP, they will find their alliance with the "best known and greatly respected" Sheridan to be a perhaps greater political embarrassment than their disastrous relationship with George Galloway.

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