

Britain: Scottish and Welsh nationalists back hung parliament

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In the general election campaign, both the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru have put themselves forward as the defenders of public services and the “vulnerable” in society.

The SNP’s Alex Salmond and Plaid’s Ieuan Wyn Jones have attacked the “London based parties” for preparing austerity measures behind the backs of the electorate. But they have also promoted the virtues of a hung parliament emerging from the election. Such a scenario would, they claim, provide the opportunity to obtain a good deal for Scotland and Wales.

Salmond stated, “The prospect of a balanced parliament...causes panic in Labour and Tory ranks. But it is a development that is welcome here in Scotland. It is with a balanced parliament that the greatest opportunity exists for the people of our nation—for Scotland it is the greatest opportunity in a generation of Westminster elections”.

Plaid Cymru’s manifesto says that with a hung parliament “a real possibility”, the party has “never before been in such a strong position to negotiate the best possible deal for Wales”.

These claims are made at a time when the global economy is in its worst crisis since the 1930s and the UK is faced with massive levels of state debt due to Labour’s bank bailout. The hung parliament that they glorify is one that will impose major austerity measures.

This gives the lie to attempts, however tenuous, of the SNP and Plaid to portray themselves as “left”. For all their denunciations of the major parties and their cuts agenda, they are thrilled by the prospect of being able to collaborate with them in government.

To this end, the SNP and Plaid have come together in an “alliance” to put pressure on the government formed out of this general election. They are to offer their votes

on an “issue by issue” basis in the House of Commons, with Jones arguing that this cooperation will create a “strong wedge” to force the new government to adopt their policies.

Notwithstanding their criticisms of the major parties for concealing the full extent of the deep spending cuts to come, the SNP and Plaid are equally guilty of this electoral fraud. The SNP claims that it can defend public services by doing away with Britain’s Trident nuclear weapons programme and the abolition of the House of Lords and dispensing with the Scottish Office, which works alongside the Westminster parliament.

The £100 billion saving from cancelling Trident is over the 40-year life cycle of the project. Actual savings in the short-term would amount to just over £2 billion a year, a drop in the ocean compared to the sustained cuts that the ruling elite and international financial institutions are demanding. Salmond’s other proposals would have even less impact, with the House of Lords and Scottish Office costing around £100 million.

Plaid also call for scrapping Trident and Lords reform, which it says will enable the party to refuse any cuts in the Welsh budget after the election. But Plaid has made it plain that it will accept cuts, as long as it has some say over them. As economics spokesman Eurfyl ap Gwilym wrote recently in the *Guardian*, “Plaid Cymru recognises that, given the parlous state of the public finances after 13 years of Labour government, cuts will have to be made. Wales will not be immune from them. However, we do object to having such cuts imposed on us when it is recognised on all sides that Wales does not receive fair funding from central government”.

The programme advanced by the SNP and Plaid

fundamentally prepares the way for deep budget cuts by dividing the working class along national lines. Pledges to fight for “Scottish” or “Welsh” interests can only involve a struggle over dwindling resources that sets each part of the UK against the others.

The SNP has its own record of imposing budget cuts, both as the minority government at Holyrood and at a local level. In Last year’s Scottish budget, proposals were outlined to cut the local authorities budget by up to £200 million, the housing budget by £250 million, and spending on education by £50 million. The latter decision has resulted in the loss of over 40 percent of teacher training places for next year, and led to proposals from local authorities to slash teacher numbers.

The SNP is also campaigning for fiscal autonomy for Scotland, which would see the parliament at Holyrood granted the power to raise its own finances rather than receive a block grant from Westminster under the Barnett formula. This would enable the SNP to realise its long-standing aim of slashing corporation tax to 12 percent. Through such means, the SNP hopes to make Scotland more “competitive”—i.e., open up a race to the bottom in living standards in order to offer the cheapest option for foreign investment.

With their campaigns oriented to currying favour with whomever takes power after May 6, both the SNP and Plaid have quietly downplayed their previous rhetoric in opposition to Britain’s involvement in wars of aggression abroad. The SNP has removed from its manifesto the pledge that it supports a withdrawal from NATO.

In a number of televised debates in Scotland, the SNP took up the criticisms of Labour made by the Tory right for not providing sufficient financial backing to British troops engaged in operations in Afghanistan.

Salmond described the Iraq war as a strategic blunder by Labour, particularly since it was launched before the mission in Afghanistan had been accomplished. Asked directly by a member of the audience whether he would back the withdrawal of British troops from Afghanistan, he responded that he was in favour of drawing up a timetable for a phased pullout provided that certain strategic objectives were met.

Jones has adopted a similar position, supporting the timeframe proposed by US President Barack Obama for a withdrawal of troops by the end of 2011. In last

Sunday’s Welsh leaders debate he declared, “I believe that bringing the conflict to an end and building the peace is the priority now for the people of Britain”.

With both parties preparing to cut a deal with either a Labour or Tory-led government after the election, the various pledges to be found in each manifesto can be taken as little more than bargaining chips that will largely be given up in the horse-trading to come.



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