

The ex-left apologists for Scottish nationalism

Socialist Equality Party (UK)
13 May 2011

The formation by the Scottish National Party (SNP) of a majority administration in the Holyrood parliament raises issues of serious concern for the working class.

The media has widely described the result as a negative vote against the austerity measures of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government in Westminster, rather than a positive endorsement of secession. Given the low level of support for outright independence and the SNP's effort to portray itself as an opponent of central government policies, this could not be otherwise.

However, the fact remains that the beneficiary of anti-government sentiment and the discrediting of the Labour Party is a right-wing, nationalist party. More important still, conditions have been created in which national tensions can be whipped up on both sides of the border, at the very point where the burning need is for a unified movement of working people against the austerity cuts being imposed by Westminster and Holyrood alike.

SNP leader Alex Salmond has said that a referendum on independence will be held in Scotland before 2015. The 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn in June 2014—when King Robert Bruce defeated England's Edward II—has reportedly been pencilled in as the date.

The SNP intends to use hostility to the government's spending cuts in the hope of making the case for separation from England. This populist smokescreen is intended to conceal the SNP's own spending cuts, which are being implemented at the same time it courts big business with promises that Scottish fiscal autonomy will lead to the slashing of corporation tax. It is on this basis that the SNP has won the backing of leading business groups, including—most notably—Rupert Murdoch's media empire, which advocated a Salmond victory, despite its previous opposition to independence.

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat government has made clear it is ready to offer greater fiscal powers for Scotland as a means of facilitating its cuts in public spending. At the same time, the SNP's divisive nationalist rhetoric is a political gift for a government that is widely despised. Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron has seized on the opportunity to pose as the defender of the national

interest, rather than the architect of the suffering of millions—pledging to “keep our United Kingdom together with every single fibre I have”.

The current situation is entirely the responsibility of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, and their satellites in the fake-left groups, who have waged a decades-long campaign to shift politics in Scotland onto a nationalist axis.

By casting Scotland as the victim of “English oppression” rather than what it is—an integral component of British imperialism—they have portrayed separatism as an anti-imperialist and even socialist tendency, and painted the SNP in fake progressive colours.

In reality, the SNP's ability to strike a left posture on issues such as student fees is dependent on the relatively favourable allocation of tax revenues under the Barnett formulae—a fact increasingly used by sections of the media in England to demand reductions in Scotland's “subsidies”.

Even so, the SNP has only postponed for a matter of months some of the most high-profile attacks it intends to carry out against workers in Scotland—and at the expense of encouraging indifference to the fate of the far greater numbers who live south of the border.

This speaks to the real social impulse behind the growth of Scottish nationalism. This is not, as its apologists claim, some leftist sentiment in the working class, but the egoistic strivings of a privileged petty bourgeois stratum for whom the development of globalised production has provided a means of making its own relations with the transnational corporations and global investors.

The SNP shares much in common with Italy's Lega Nord and similar tendencies throughout Europe, which invoke real or imagined national grievances as a vehicle for demanding their right to exploit their “own” working class and monopolise the resulting profits. As a former oil economist for RBS (Royal Bank of Scotland), Salmond embodies this grasping stratum and its intimate relations with powerful sections of big business.

The interests of this selfsame financial oligarchy dictated the decision by Tony Blair's New Labour Party to back devolution for Scotland and Wales. As the advocate of the

free-market nostrums associated with Thatcher, Labour recognised that measures to stimulate inter-regional competition were entirely compatible with its agenda for transforming Britain into a playground for the super-rich and weakening the political cohesion of the working class.

In the aftermath of devolution, the bourgeoisie enjoyed an unprecedented bonanza in Scotland—exceeded only by the gains it made in London and the south-east.

Scotland's GDP per capita was consistently in excess of England's, and compared with most English regions, was and remains significantly larger. This is accounted for by the growth of Edinburgh as the second centre for the criminal, speculative frenzy by the banks and financial institutions over the last two decades. Between 2001 and 2008, British-based banking assets rose by nearly £4.5 billion with RBS—by then the fourth largest banking concern in the world—accounting for 45 percent of this increase.

In certain circles, Scotland became known as RBS PLC—until the bank virtually collapsed in 2008, posting the greatest losses in British corporate history. It is this development, which demanded one of the largest taxpayer-funded bailouts on record, that helped convince Salmond and the SNP to backpedal on the issue of outright independence and focus on greater fiscal powers for Holyrood.

During these politically tumultuous years, the ex-left groups, foremost among them the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), originating as a nationalist breakaway from the Militant-Committee for a Workers International group, did everything they could to convince workers that Holyrood and independence represented the way forward.

Mass disaffection from Labour and opposition to the Iraq War saw the SSP win close to five percent of the vote in 2003 and secure six members of the Scottish Parliament. Holyrood was a gravy train for the SSP, providing the bulk of its personal and party income and access to the corridors of power and influence, including newspaper columns for its leading figures. In terms of the development of the class struggle, however, the SSP's electoral gains had an entirely retrograde impact. They were used solely as a platform to promulgate nationalism and demand the SNP step up its demand for outright independence.

The legacy of the SSP's rotten political manoeuvring has been to enforce the political domination of Salmond's party. The SSP itself collapsed into unprincipled, factional warfare that saw the party's leading personnel collude with the police and Murdoch's News International to secure the imprisonment of its former leader, Tommy Sheridan.

The SSP and Sheridan's Solidarity were reduced to nothing in the recent election. Undeterred, both have hailed the SNP victory as a great result for Scotland.

Blogging from prison before the result, Sheridan called for a vote for the SNP, claiming, "An SNP outright majority would be the best outcome. Such a determined stand led by an SNP government could force the Con-Dems onto the back foot and unite Scotland".

SSP leader Colin Fox pledged what remains of his party to "win the argument for independence outside Holyrood in the pubs, clubs, community centres and workplaces across the land".

Making clear his organisation's close relations with Salmond's party, Fox argued that the SNP victory offered "an unprecedented opportunity for the left. The SNP is incapable of delivering a majority for independence on its own, and to be fair it has acknowledged this frequently in the Independence Convention which the SSP joined".

Sheridan openly counter-poses national unity to class unity. The SSP identifies itself as a specialist opponent of socialism. Leading member Ken Ferguson denounces "hopelessly muddled 'internationalists' on the British left who will bleat about separatism", while Jo Harvie attacked "the groupsecules [sic] of the nasty left" who "remain subject to the rule of London-based bureaux".

Important lessons must be drawn from these experiences.

The pseudo-left do not constitute in any sense an independent political force. They are propagandists for the Scottish bourgeoisie and its chosen party. This is not the final stop on their political journey. As the economic crisis worsens and social antagonisms deepen, they will reveal themselves ever more openly as vicious opponents of the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party appeals to workers and youth to oppose all attempts to legitimise the age-old strategy of divide and rule.

There are no common interests between workers and their exploiters, whatever flag they wave. Against national chauvinism and petty self-interest, we advance the building of a mass socialist and internationalist workers' movement, under the leadership of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact