

Scottish writers lined up to endorse nationalism

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Several prominent Scottish writers—Iain Banks, Janice Galloway, A.L. Kennedy, David Greig and Shena Mackay—recently expressed support for Scottish independence. They were responding to the question posed to them by the *Guardian*: “Scotland and England: what future for the Union?”

These are sharply contrasting writers, exploring different areas of human experience and invention. But politically, at least three of them identify themselves as former Labour voters and say they have now turned to the Scottish National Party (SNP), claiming it is to the left of their former party. They all appear indifferent to the true class character of the SNP and the role of nationalism as a tool to divide the working class.

Iain Banks is the most open. In his opinion, “Scotland could have a future as a completely independent country.” In 2004, he signed the Calton Declaration calling for a Scottish republic.

Banks explains that, after the appearance of Tony Blair’s New Labour, he moved to the Greens, the Scottish Socialist Party, the Liberal Democrats and finally the SNP. He voted SNP, “Not because I was particularly nationalistic. Like a lot of people on the left I’ve always been suspicious of the populist, divisive appeal of nationalism—but because the SNP’s policies were more progressive, more left wing, more fair, in the end, compared to any other party with a realistic chance of achieving power.”

He goes on, “These days, I support the idea of an independent Scotland. It’s with a heavy heart in some ways; I think I’d still sacrifice an independent Scotland for a socialist UK, but.... I can’t really see that happening. What I can imagine is England continuing to turn to the right and eventually leaving the EU [European Union] altogether.”

Janice Galloway writes that “while I do not wish to

conflate class with nationality (the working classes of England, Wales and Northern Ireland can hardly feel valued by pay gaps that have widened beyond belief), I believe Scottish priorities for solutions to health, education and social mobility might be different.”

Playwright David Greig professes to be “an old-fashioned social democrat.... I have equated nationalism with racism, xenophobia, inward-looking-ness and militarism. I have spent my adult life voting and campaigning for a British Labour party. All the while, I’ve kept my eye on Scottish nationalism, watching and waiting, distrusting it, expecting it to reveal its true dark heart. But it never has.”

Taken together, the adoption by Banks, Galloway and Greig of Scottish nationalism reflects a demoralised, myopic retreat by a petty bourgeois social layer, cosseted by their wealth and that appears to have little understanding of what is going on in the world around them.

The claims they make on behalf of the SNP are ludicrous. It is a party of the financial aristocracy no less than Labour. Now courted and backed by Rupert Murdoch and News International, it has long been funded by Stagecoach multimillionaire and evangelist Sir Brian Souter. Alex Salmond, SNP leader and Scottish First Minister, is a former oil economist for the Royal Bank of Scotland.

The SNP claims its nationalism is progressive and demands the ending of old suspicions regarding “the populist, divisive appeal of nationalism” or that equate “nationalism with racism, xenophobia, inward-looking-ness and militarism”.

In reality, the SNP is by no means the first such party that postures as championing limited social benefits—providing they are only available to their “own” people. The same can be said of right-wing

parties such as Italy's Northern League and the Flemish separatists of the Vlaams Belang. Like them, the SNP speaks for a section of the regional elite intent on filling their bank accounts.

The SNP's pose as a "left" party concerned for social spending is a political fraud aiming to hide the right-wing, character of the SNP's nationalist appeal. All the party's business backers consider independence, or increased tax-varying powers, as tools to accelerate the lowering of workers' wages, while slashing social spending and increasing corporate profits.

The SNP already works in tandem with the Conservative-Liberal Democrat administration in Westminster and is cutting £1.3 billion in public spending this year alone. Students from England are specifically barred from the SNP's headline policy of free university tuition fees, reflecting the deep anti-English chauvinism with which the party is saturated.

Its pose of social reformism is based in the fact that, under the Barnett formula, which allocates regional funding in the UK, Scotland has a somewhat higher per capita figure than England. But if the SNP succeeds in cutting corporation tax from 30 to 20 percent, deep cuts will be required.

Salmond made perfectly clear that fully he shares the priorities of his counterparts in Westminster when, last month, he despatched van loads of riot police to help suppress riots by impoverished youth across England's major cities.

Noteworthy in all their solicited comments is their indifference or even hostility to workers in England. A.L. Kennedy, an ordained minister and *Guardian* columnist, ruminates: "Perhaps an independent England will become a country where the rich prosper, despite repeated scandals, and the poor...well, die. Perhaps Scotland will be different?"

Novelist Shena Mackay declares more bluntly, "I want Scotland to be Scottish through and through--I hate to hear English accents in the shops there."

Is this a modest proposal for the ethnic cleansing of Edinburgh and Glasgow? It is, in any case, no less reactionary than a declaration in England that Scottish, east European, Irish, or Asian accents are no longer to be tolerated.

Banks recently appended his name to a launch appeal for the Jimmy Reid Foundation, named after the former Stalinist union leader.

In the late 1960s, Reid, along with the Communist Party of Great Britain, heavily promoted Scottish nationalism as a means of advancing class collaboration as an alternative to the class struggle. Reid's 1971 proposal of a "work-in" at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) sought to divert workers in Scotland, opposing the closure of major industries, into a campaign to find a Scottish buyer for the UCS yards.

The next three years saw the emergence of the most powerful movement of the British working class since the 1926 General Strike, ending with the miners bringing down the Conservative government of Edward Heath.

The SNP was hostile to this class movement. Referring to the North Sea oil field, the SNP took as its main slogan, "It's Scotland's Oil". In return for a pledge to create a Scottish Assembly and greater access to oil revenues, it has since been revealed that it offered to form a coalition to keep the Tories in office.

The aim of the Reid Foundation is to smother the emergence of a unified movement of the working class under a blanket of nationalist rhetoric. Banks and company are recruits to this politically rotten cause.

Writing in 2007, another Scottish writer, Andrew O'Hagan, complained, "As a Scottish person, I have lived my whole life surrounded by the petulant noise of Scottish nationalism. It was a ludicrous sound in my childhood, a bit like the bagpipes, produced by wind and sentiment, and it has played on through the years in spite of its ugliness."

His comments better reflect the experience of large numbers of working people who sense that the daily lives, political and social fate of workers in Scotland, England, and beyond are inextricably tied. The defence of the working class in Britain and internationally now demands a unified political movement of the working class opposed to all forms of regionalism and nationalism.



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