

Tensions over Scottish independence referendum

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Sharp disputes have emerged over the proposed referendum on Scottish independence. Former Scottish secretary of state, Michael Forsyth, now Lord Forsyth, recently claimed in Parliament that Scottish National Party (SNP) leader and Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond threatened to sabotage a vote instigated by the British government.

The claim follows the SNP's election victory in May this year, when it won its first majority in the devolved Scottish parliament at Holyrood. The separatist party was able to take advantage of broad hostility to the Labour Party, long the largest party in Scotland, to advance itself as a progressive alternative.

The SNP is a right-wing party of the Scottish business elite. In government, like devolved administrations in Northern Ireland and Wales, the SNP has pushed ahead with cuts demanded by the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government in London. The SNP budget for 2011-2012 will cut spending by 7 percent in one year as part of a 12.3 percent cut in real terms to 2015.

Nonetheless, the party has sought to divert attention from its role in implementing the cuts by claiming that responsibility lies with London rule. It has been aided in this task by middle-class ex-left organizations such as the Scottish Socialist Party, which support the divisive perspective of Scottish secession.

As a consequence, support for independence, which has for many years held steady at around 30 percent, has begun to increase. One recent, albeit very small, poll put support for secession at 39 percent across the UK and as high as 49 percent in Scotland.

This is the context of the row over the referendum. At issue is not whether the SNP has the right to call a referendum, although the 1998 Scotland Act under which devolution was authorized allocates that right solely to the British government.

In 2008, then-Scottish Labour leader Wendy Alexander

was forced to resign because she demanded that the minority SNP administration called a poll on independence. Alexander was seeking to expose the limited support amongst broad layers of the population for secession and called for the SNP to "bring it on."

Alexander was promptly dumped as Scottish Labour leader at the instigation of then-British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. For Brown and Labour, conceding the right to the Scottish executive to call a poll was reason enough to sack her.

In 2011, however, no such qualms have been raised by Brown's successor in Downing Street. Immediately after Salmond's election victory, Tory Prime Minister David Cameron advised Salmond that the new government in London would put no obstacles in the way of an SNP-instigated poll. Salmond told a recent SNP conference that he intended to introduce a "Claim of Right" to the Scottish parliament to confirm Holyrood's right to hold a ballot.

Cameron and Salmond are, however, in dispute over timing and wording. At a recent conference, Salmond reaffirmed his view that a vote would be held towards the latter part of the Scottish parliamentary session, around 2015. He counts that by this period, the Cameron government will be even more generally reviled, while the SNP, cushioned by the ex-lefts and the Barnett formula, whereby public spending in Scotland remains at a somewhat higher level than in England, can present itself as a left alternative to the Tories. The SNP also hope to reap advantage from reducing the voting age to 16.

Cameron, echoing Wendy Alexander's view of 2008, has called for Salmond to hold a poll as early as possible, warning that uncertainty associated with the outcome was unsettling investment.

Discussions also appear to have been held on the possibility of the British government holding its own, legally binding, poll in advance of the SNP's advisory,

vote.

Sections of the Tory party in Scotland, anxious to derail moves towards independence, have called for a two-option “yes” or “no” on independence as soon as possible. Given that majority opinion remains opposed to secession, the status quo would be upheld.

Salmond responded at an SNP conference, setting the tone for the referendum campaign, by claiming that “the days of Westminster politicians telling Scotland what to do or what to think are over.”

He appears to have threatened to translate his nationalist bombast into more practical steps. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, former Tory Scottish Secretary Michael Forsyth was told by “government sources” that Salmond personally told UK Chancellor George Osborne the SNP government would refuse to offer police protection or public sector assistance for a Westminster-organised vote.

Forsyth repeated his allegation in the House of Lords. He went on, “Alex Salmond knows perfectly well that the Scottish Parliament cannot properly and legally organise a referendum on Scottish independence or any constitutional question concerning the Union. That is reserved to Westminster.”

Salmond denied any knowledge of the threat to the poll and retorted, “The UK Government has no mandate whatever on the referendum issue, and no amount of wishful thinking by Lord Forsyth can change that.”

The SNP has announced that its referendum paper will include a third option, “devolution-max,” which involves the transfer of almost all tax-raising, borrowing and spending powers to Edinburgh, leaving only defence and foreign affairs to Westminster.

Under previous circumstances, Salmond’s alleged threats would have caused a political uproar and been the subject of intense investigation, since they are an explicit challenge to the authority of Westminster concerning an area of decisive significance to the future of the 304-year-old United Kingdom.

On this occasion, however, only Forsyth and former MP and historian Lord Cormack appear to have complained. Both are rather marginalised figures of the Tory right. Cormack likened Salmond to Ian Smith, who declared Rhodesia independent from the UK, and his successor, Robert Mugabe.

Cameron, however, made no reference to the matter. On the occasion of the election of a new Tory leader in Scotland, Ruth Davidson, he merely challenged Alex Salmond “to set the date and to agree the question now.”

Reporting of the dispute has also been restrained, with

only the *Daily Telegraph* and the Scottish press paying much attention. Underlying media disinterest are the class interests represented by both the SNP and the Tories, who see the promotion of Scottish independence as a valuable tool against the working class.

For Cameron, and both Labour and the Tories in England, pointing to supposedly over-funded and “whinging” Scotland as a drain on public spending is a useful device in pushing through spending cuts across the UK.

For Salmond and much of the Scottish political establishment, attacking London Tories is the default position on all matters and the means by which their own class interests are hidden. Earlier in 2011, Salmond attacked the UK Supreme Court for allegedly impinging on the Scottish legal system, while the SNP has recently become embroiled in a row with Labour’s Ian Davidson over the role of the Scottish Affairs Select Committee in Westminster and whether it has the any right to investigate SNP proposals.

Both London and Edinburgh see accelerating devolution through tax-cutting powers as an experiment that can be emulated in Wales and Northern Ireland to further drive down corporation taxes and public spending. It is accepted that this will deepen a host of complex and potentially explosive disputes over the carve-up of resources, debts, spending and even the armed forces, particularly if matters develop to the point of Scottish independence. In official circles, however, these are coming to be viewed as political problems to be managed and manipulated rather than avoided at all costs.



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