

Tories and Scottish National Party argue over terms of independence referendum

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The faction fight that has broken out within Britain's ruling elite over the timing and wording of a referendum on Scottish independence is without a shred of principle.

Whether for or against the separation of Scotland and England, the competing parties are all utilising nationalism as a lightning rod against growing social opposition to Britain's ruling elite and the capitalist profit system that it defends.

For the next months, political life is to be dominated by arguments over whether separation or the preservation of the Union will benefit Scotland and England and accusations and counter-accusations of special privilege, undemocratic measures and national oppression.

This not only diverts attention from the united offensive by the parliaments and parties at Westminster and Holyrood to impose savage cuts in the interests of the banks and speculators; its primary aim is to sow national divisions at the very point when the need for a united working class counter-offensive against big business and its political representatives is paramount.

Prime Minister David Cameron last week published legal advice that a "legally binding" referendum on Scottish independence could only be taken with the agreement of Westminster.

His announcement was in part an attempt to call the bluff of Scottish National Party leader Alex Salmond who, since winning an outright majority in elections to the Scottish parliament in May, has stepped up his rhetoric for separation from England. In October, Salmond announced that Scotland would hold a referendum on independence by 2015 and indicated that, in addition to the questions of for or against independence, there would be a third option of greater financial autonomy short of outright separation, dubbed

"devo[lution] max".

By pressing Salmond to set a date for the referendum, and arguing that it should be restricted to for or against independence, the Conservative leader sought to wrest back control of constitutional debate and set out his stall as the defender of the 300-year Union between England and Scotland.

However, for all the heat between the Tories and the SNP there is a strong element of agreement between them.

The Cameron-led government has, in fact, sought to establish a closer working relationship with Holyrood. With barely any representation outside southern England, the Conservative leader is dependent on the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to help enforce his government's largest package of spending cuts since the 1920s. To this end, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition has drawn up legislation giving greater revenue raising powers to Scotland. This is aimed at cutting the block public spending grants administered by the devolved administrations by up to 12 percent in the next two years. A key target is the public sector, which accounts for a greater share of spending and employment in Scotland than in England.

By holding out the promise of a legally binding referendum, the government hopes to win Holyrood's agreement for these measures. At the same time, it has brought forward what it considers to be its trump card—the threat that an independent Scotland would not be able to retain sterling, and would have to seek admission to the euro instead.

This cynical utilisation of the eurozone crisis underscores the class character of Cameron's referendum initiative. Across Europe, the political elite has seized on the economic crisis to devastate workers'

living standards, drive down wages and overturn hard-won social protections. To divert from the real source of this crisis in the rapacious and parasitic activities of the financial oligarchy, this has been accompanied by vicious campaigns in Europe's media denouncing the "greedy Greeks", "idle Italians", etc.

A substantial section of the Tory Party has long complained that Scotland's block grant is used to finance free university education, health prescriptions and other limited social provisions, at England's expense. Their complaint is naturally not directed against the absence of this provision in England, but that they still exist anywhere at all.

Notably, Cameron's publication of legal advice came just days before the government established a committee to investigate barring Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish MPs from voting on "English matters" at Westminster. The Tory leader calculates that the row over a referendum could provide a political vehicle for mobilising a chauvinist campaign to block social opposition to the government's own austerity measures.

The same class impulses animate Cameron's opponents in Scotland, who have joined forces to stoke up Scottish nationalism.

At Holyrood last week, the SNP successfully tabled a motion that a referendum should be held in 2014—to coincide with the 700th anniversary of King Robert the Bruce's victory over King Edward II of England at the Battle of Bannockburn.

While differing on outright separation, Scottish Labour has similarly insisted that the terms of any referendum should be determined by the "Scottish people". It is pressing for the "devo max" option, and has called for cross-party talks to this end—a demand supported by the Scottish Trades Union Congress.

There is nothing progressive about the demands for greater autonomy or outright separation. Both articulate the interests of a bourgeois and privileged petty bourgeois layer who regard such moves as a means of establishing their relations directly with the major corporations and financial institutions by transforming Scotland into a low tax production and investment platform within Europe.

Always hovering in the background are conflicts over who will pocket the taxes and revenues from North Sea oil and gas.

Devolution was one of the first initiatives of the incoming Labour administration in 1997. The minor social concessions made in Scotland over the last decade were window dressing, behind which finance capital consolidated its stranglehold over the economy, effectively transforming the country into an adjunct of the Royal Bank of Scotland—subsequently rescued at taxpayers' expense.

It is entirely possible that "devo max" will still end up part of a referendum. But whether fiscal autonomy is achieved via independence or greater devolution, the goal of the respective parties is the same. In response to the economic crisis, they are even more desperate to slash corporate taxes and cut welfare to make Scotland more competitive against its neighbours.

The pseudo-left groups in Scotland are playing the central role in giving this anti-working class line-up a progressive veneer. Long the cheerleaders of Scottish independence and the SNP, they are again acting as the mouthpiece for a reactionary, divisive campaign.

Speaking at a rally of the United Left (Scotland)—part of the Unite trade union—in Glasgow at the weekend, Scottish Socialist Party member John McAllion claimed that, faced with the choice of British or Scottish nationalism in a referendum, "Scottish nationalism is better for the workers".



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