

# Scottish nationalists outline independence referendum

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Scotland's first minister, Alex Salmond, has announced that a referendum on independence from the UK will be held in autumn 2014.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) leader gave notice of the date in a consultation paper published by his majority administration Wednesday. It will pose the question, "Do you agree Scotland should be an independent country," Salmond said.

His announcement is the latest example of the way all competing sections of the UK's ruling elite are poisoning the political atmosphere with nationalism as a means of dividing the working class and preventing a united offensive against the policies of austerity that are supported by all the official parties. The parliament at Westminster has separately launched a "public consultation" on the SNP's referendum plan.

Salmond's reference to a "simple" question appeared to be a concession to Prime Minister David Cameron, who had earlier said that a referendum would be considered legally binding only if it were restricted to a straight yes/no vote on independence. The SNP leader also conceded that the UK Electoral Commission would oversee the referendum, after ruling it out previously.

However, he said that the commission, which is in charge of UK ballots, will not be able to determine the question posed. This is because he still also wants the option of "maximum devolution"—greater fiscal autonomy short of independence—on the ballot.

This has so far been ruled out by Westminster. The SNP cannot be seen to endorse or favour "devo-max" for fear of alienating its hard-line nationalist base. That is why Salmond framed the issue in his statement as a question of democratic rights and Scottish control of Scotland's affairs. Should this alternative be found to "command wide support in Scotland" during the

consultation procedure, then it "should be among the choices open to the people of Scotland", he said.

With opinion polls showing support for independence in a minority, the SNP is expected to lose on a straight vote for separation. But Salmond's stance is motivated by more than the usual rank political opportunism.

The demand for Scottish independence expresses the desire of a section of the bourgeoisie and upper-middle class to make their own relations directly with the major corporations and finance capital. Salmond, a former economist at the Royal Bank of Scotland, epitomises this layer, whose objective is to turn Scotland into a tax haven for big business by stepping up the exploitation of their "own" working class in competition with workers in the UK and Europe.

This class agenda is concealed behind bogus assertions of Scotland's national oppression by England and claims that the minimal social protections enacted by Holyrood—such as free university tuition for Scottish students—have made the goal of independence a "beacon for progressive opinion".

For all the SNP's posturing as the champion of national self-determination, the first minister has said that an "independent" Scotland will retain the British monarchy and sterling as its currency, with the Bank of England acting as the "lender of last resort"!

Salmond can make such statements without any apparent trace of irony because what really counts for the privileged, grasping layers for whom he speaks is their control over Scotland's economy to set corporate and income tax levels in favour of the super-rich.

Their model is Ireland, whose low level of corporation tax means that it accounts for fully 95 percent of the receipts paid by Microsoft in Europe. In the meantime, the Irish working class—which is being made to shoulder the full burden of this parasitism in

the form of multibillion-pound bailouts of the country's failed banks—has been subject to some of the most draconian austerity measures in Europe.

In the lecture delivered by Salmond earlier in the week, he boasted of “major investments” in Scotland over the last year by Amazon, Michelin, Dell, Gamesa, and Aveloq. “International inward investment is now more successful in Scotland than any other parts of these islands, including London”, he said.

Referring to the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's austerity measures, Salmond said that “nobody denies that the UK government's budget deficit needs to be tackled.” The “sheer scale” of the austerity measures set in motion, however, was “counterproductive”.

Salmond's concern is not for the jobs, wages and livelihoods of millions of working people that are being destroyed, but its impact on “cuts to capital spending”.

The Scottish parliament has outlined its “Plan MacB” for the economic crisis, contained in the Budget Bill for 2012/2013 passed this week. This claims that Holyrood's decision to fund infrastructure programmes such as the new Forth Crossing and the Glasgow Southern Hospitals project “prioritise economic recovery”. The preparedness to use state funds to “stimulate” the economy is counterposed to Westminster's cut in funding across the board.

In reality, this is just another means of transferring public monies to the private sector—in this case, the various consultants, planners and building firms involved in their construction. It is reported that, once completed, the Forth Crossing will be managed by a private company.

Holyrood agreed that this latest sop to big business should be partially funded by slashing £750 million from “day-to-day spending”. The housing budget is to be cut by one third and college spending by £70 million. Notably, funding for employment and anti-poverty programmes, as well as for legal aid, is to be cut. The wage freeze on public-sector workers will be extended for another year.

Small wonder that Salmond could crow in his lecture that “Plan MacB” has been endorsed by Holyrood's appointed Council of Economic Advisers, which includes “Professor Joseph Stiglitz, Professor Frances Ruane and Professor Sir James Mirrleas to advise on our economic strategy.”

Respectively, Stiglitz and Ruane were formerly chief economist at the World Bank and research economist at the Central Bank of Ireland. Mirrleas headed a review of the UK's tax system in 2010 that recommended sweeping changes aimed at further redistributing wealth from working people to the rich.

The SNP intends to build up a campaign to pressure Westminster to accept a multiple-option referendum. Central to this will not only be the inclusion of business leaders, Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Salmond has made a point of appealing to “civic leaders” for support. This is directed in particular to the Scottish Trades Union Congress and the ex-left groups, such as the Scottish Socialist Party, which the SNP has relied on to provide a pseudo-socialist gloss for its right-wing agenda.

Whatever their tactical preference as regards “devo-max” or outright independence, these organisations' fulsome embrace of Scottish nationalism expresses their hostility towards the interests of the broad mass of working people throughout the UK and support for the egotistical ambitions of their own bourgeoisie. Even in advance of Salmond's referendum announcement, the pseudo-left organisations had pledged their intention to organise a “grassroots” campaign in support of independence.



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