

Scottish National Party lurches right on social care and militarism

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The Scottish National Party (SNP) administration in Edinburgh is pushing “reforms” through the Scottish parliament that will undermine the public provision of social care.

The Self-Directed Support (Scotland) bill, due to come into force later this year, will lead to the destruction of council-run services under the guise of offering more “choice” to individuals. The SNP’s bill will facilitate the outsourcing of many services traditionally provided in the public sector to such organisations. Charities, “social enterprises” and other private organisations stand to gain millions of pounds in public revenue. The result will not only be the deterioration in the provision of care for many of the most vulnerable, but also an attack on pay and working conditions for care workers.

The main focus of the bill is on the personalisation of care budgets, meaning that it will be the responsibility of individuals to organise their care arrangements. Rather than being planned at the council level, each person will be allocated an individual budget to purchase services from private sector organisations or charities, or through the direct employment of individuals. Such procedures have already been implemented by some councils, but the bill will compel all local authorities to make such provision the norm.

Glasgow City Council was one of the authorities that piloted the personalisation approach to running care services, with the explicit aim of slashing social care budgets. A Glasgow City Council Executive Committee report, published in October 2010, declared enthusiastically, “The experience from England is that re-direction potential can be in the range of 20-30 percent”.

Much of these savings are being achieved by the tightening up of eligibility criteria for access to social care, meaning that many will have to go without any support.

The SNP has passed its own version of the UK

Parliament’s Welfare Reform Act, which makes cuts to welfare benefits over which they have control. Private corporations such as Capita Group are playing a leading advisory role. The new legislation will intensify the process of bidders competing to receive contracts and provide a direct incentive for the driving down of wages to cut service costs.

This is being facilitated by the trade unions. Unison, the public sector union, has declared its full backing for the personalisation agenda, although it has been compelled to note the cost-cutting it imposes. In a briefing the union boasted, “Unison’s position on personalisation is clear—we support it.”

Unison’s professed concern over cuts is therefore thoroughly hypocritical. The union officialdom has accommodated itself entirely to the system of tendering for contracts in social care, setting up separate branches at each charity or private organisation involved in running services. Unison’s main focus has been the maintenance of good relations with the employers, offering its services to cut costs and police its members in the workplace.

Unison has played a crucial role in imposing pay freezes and cuts on behalf of management across the care sector. At Quarriers, which provides care to young people and adults with disabilities, Unison last year demobilised opposition to sweeping pay cuts and removal of workplace benefits. Workers at other organisations such as Capability Scotland have been subject to a pay freeze over two years, enforced by Unison.

Matching its lurch to the right of social issues, the SNP has also announced that it intends to change party policy on membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Speaking at a press conference in Edinburgh, SNP leader and Scottish first minister Alex Salmond explained that he intended to vote for a resolution at the SNP’s annual conference this autumn reversing the party’s

decades-long rejection of NATO membership.

“Times change. Circumstances change,” said Salmond. The party would debate a resolution that sets out its “willingness to co-operate with our friends and allies”.

Opposition to NATO and the location of the British Trident nuclear submarine fleet at the Faslane naval base, near Glasgow, have been articles of faith for a shrinking layer of SNP supporters. But Salmond’s remarks are hardly surprising. For more than a decade, the SNP has been seeking a propitious moment to officially ditch a position it has long ago abandoned in practice.

The wealthy financiers backing the SNP do not intend an independent Scotland to miss out on the spoils from a new US-led global carve-up.

In 1999, Salmond became the target of a vicious campaign from the then Labour government for his denunciation of NATO’s air assault on Serbia as an “act of dubious legality, but above all one of unpardonable folly”. Salmond’s position then was bound up with the SNP’s orientation to the European Union, and the view that the US-led action was an unwelcome military show of force within the EU’s backyard.

Within a year, Salmond had resigned as SNP leader under unclear circumstances and was replaced by current Scottish finance secretary John Swinney. In 2001, Swinney made clear that he opposed the party’s anti-NATO policy. When Salmond re-emerged as Swinney’s replacement in 2004, it was clearly based on an understanding that never again would the SNP get so out of step with the major imperialist powers. In the meantime, France and Germany, which opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, had fallen into line with the US turn to open militarism.

Since taking office in Edinburgh in 2007, the SNP has daily sought to win the confidence and trust of the US and British military establishment, while pursuing its policy of moving towards an independent capitalist Scotland. The SNP has co-operated with the use of Scottish bases and forces in NATO’s war in Afghanistan and its assault on Libya. In 2009, SNP foreign affairs and defence spokesman Angus Robertson insisted on BBC Radio that it was “absolute nonsense” to suggest that a future Scottish army would not serve alongside NATO forces. The SNP, successfully, campaigned to retain at least one Scottish-based mobile army brigade, following a British government defence review.

Salmond also opposed the closure of RAF bases at Kinloss and Leuchars.

At the opening of a 2012 House of Commons Defence

Committee inquiry into the implications of Scottish independence for the British military, Robertson stated unequivocally, “Post-independence, the SNP supports continuing co-operation with the rest of the UK, including basing, training, logistics and procurement”.

He called on the inquiry to “investigate the £5.6 billion defence underspend and 10,500 defence job losses in Scotland over the last decade within the Union”.

The proposals being put to the SNP conference call for a £500 million *increase* in current conventional military spending and commit to maintaining “current defence and security responsibilities” in the North Sea and Atlantic Ocean, while identifying the “Environmental changes to the High North and Arctic Region [as] major regional challenges “.

The melting Arctic has become a hotly contested and oil-rich geo-political arena between the NATO powers and Russia. In line with this, the SNP calls for an arms strategy based on building new frigates, submarines, fast jets and maritime patrol aircraft—these to be provided by “joint procurement” with the UK.

This will be bound up with new assaults on democratic rights, domestic spying and surveillance. The SNP proposal calls for “cyber security and intelligence infrastructure to deal with new threats and protect key national economic and social infrastructure”.

Regarding NATO, the SNP proposes the “speediest safe transition of the nuclear fleet from Faslane” and seeks to “maintain NATO membership subject to an agreement that Scotland will not host nuclear weapons”.

Commenting on the proposal, SNP elder statesmen Jim Sillars, a supporter of NATO membership, noted that this meant the “transition” to remove Trident would take years.



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