

Scottish National Party advances “Common Weal” project

Steve James
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Late June, a number of articles appeared in the Scottish press promoting and discussing a “Common Weal” proposal from the Jimmy Reid Foundation. The *Sunday Herald* gave the project front-page coverage, while the foundation’s director, former Labour Party press officer Robin McAlpine, is frequently given column space in the *Scotsman*.

The Scottish National Party’s (SNP) annual conference in the autumn will host a Common Weal fringe meeting, while the party’s chief whip in Edinburgh has called for a formal debate. Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has been reported to be sympathetic. No less than the Church of Scotland has formed a working group.

Taking their cue, the ex-left International Socialist Group (ISG), composed of Scotland-based ex-members of the Socialist Workers Party, also approved. The ISG’s Ben Wray welcomed the Common Weal as “developing a programme to challenge every aspect of neo-liberalism from international relations to land reform to arts and culture.”

It is nothing of the sort. Common Weal is an overtly pro-capitalist programme advocating low tax rates for business. Its purpose is to win sections of business, the trade unions and academia to its nationalist and parochial programme for capitalism in Scotland.

The 2014 referendum on Scottish independence is likely, on current polls, to result in a resounding “No”. While growing numbers of working people in Scotland despise both the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government and the Labour Party, many are also deeply distrustful of the SNP and of separatism. There is a deep-rooted and well-founded concern that Scottish independence must entail the break-up of the social welfare and health provisions currently organised—and under assault—on an all-Britain basis.

Overcoming this to secure a “Yes” vote is the task to which Common Weal, and a raft of closely related formations such as the Radical Independence Convention, is devoted.

This is in keeping with the perspective of the Reid Foundation itself, named after the late shipyard trade union leader and former Stalinist, Jimmy Reid, who made his name in the 1971-73 at the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) dispute. When UCS’ closure was announced, Reid led efforts by the Communist Party of Great Britain to prevent the dispute becoming a focal point for an all-out struggle against the then-Tory government, diverting shipyard workers into a search for a rival, preferably Scottish, buyer for the yards. Reid went on to join the Labour Party, denounced striking miners during the 1984-85 strike and died in 2010 as a member of the SNP.

The Reid Foundation’s backers include Unite trade union leader Len McCluskey, former Labour First Minister Henry McCleish, along with Scottish nationalist writers and political figures such as former SNP MP Winnie Ewing.

Director Robin McAlpine’s 27 June *Scotsman* piece is typical of its efforts to sell the supposed benefits of an independent capitalist Scotland.

After criticising some aspects of free market and particularly British capitalism, McAlpine described the Common Weal as a “sort of social and economic model of the Nordic countries, but in a distinctively Scottish context.”

Its aspiration, claimed McAlpine, was to replace a “Tesco economy based on multinationals draining wealth from the economy with a domestic economy dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises engaged in really productive work.”

Tesco is a major supermarket chain.

Taxes, wrote McAlpine, should be increased to allow higher wages and help government “focus on helping Scottish firms to establish and succeed.” Scottish business “should never have to pay higher rates of tax than their multinational competitors.” Public procurement should be “marshalled behind indigenous industries.”

Similar comments came from former Scottish enterprise minister and millionaire, Jim Mather. Writing in the *Scottish Left Review*, also founded by Reid, Mather described himself as “up for a Common Weal approach.” Mather, who is credited with winning sections of Scottish business to the SNP, called for an end to the class struggle, or as he put it, “‘employers versus employees’, ‘them and us’ attitudes,” in order to “ensure long term collaboration, intrinsic motivation and better ability to compete.”

Mather gave an impressionist sketch of the world capitalist crisis, presenting the post-2008 breakdown as stemming from the actions of “carnivores in financial markets” with “a vested interest in the continuing instability of capitalism.”

Based on this vision, Mather advocated a return to an idealized form of early capitalism, in which local banks supposedly supported local companies.

The most substantial Common Weal document to date outlined six “transitions”. These involved a Norwegian-style oil fund, a Scottish national investment bank, the restoration of an “effective banking tradition”, more Scottish-owned business, mutuals and co-operatives favoured by public procurement, and a close relationship with the trade unions. These would “enable a discussion” on social welfare!

There is nothing remotely socialist or left-wing about any of this. It is explicitly a programme for the expansion of a middling layer of capitalists in Scotland. Common Weal laud the German *Mittelstand* companies, which employ 70 percent of workers in Germany, but only create 50 percent of GDP. This domestically-based layer of smaller capitalists—many of whom are being squeezed by the deepening crisis—should, in the view of Common Weal, be the main beneficiaries of state funding and support.

The repeated invocation of Nordic and occasionally German models of capitalism ignore the recent experience in those countries. Norway last year saw the

worst outburst of fascistic violence in Europe since the Second World War.

Sweden over the past few years has led the way in the privatisation of health and education. The country was recently gripped by the worst riots in its history, as poverty and unemployment afflict large sections of young people.

The German economy, particularly its vaunted *Mittelstand*, has become synonymous with “mini-jobs”—part time, low paid, unregulated work—which are increasingly the only options available for ever-larger numbers of workers. Common Weal does not even bother to identify, let alone explore, the implications of the on-going euro zone crisis, or the trajectory of social policy across Europe. Still less does it seek insight into a prognosis for world capitalism.

Common Weal hails the Nordic countries’ “employee representation on management boards,” “strong trade unions in a mutual rather than conflict relationship,” which are claimed to be the key to income and wealth inequality. In fact, as Common Weal and its backers well know, the trade unions’ suppression of the class struggle is key to the ability of the ruling class to devastate the living standards of working people across Europe. To cover this over, Common Weal documents exude a particularly grating and empty optimism redolent of sales brochures. Apparently, “Scotland is buzzing with people thinking about a better, more equal future,” and “Common Weal is an idea that belongs to anyone who wants that something different.”

In reality, the class interests behind Common Weal and the Reid Foundation itself are those of a wealthy layer of the upper middle class, including the ex-lefts and the trade union bureaucracy, who see Scottish independence as a passport to lucrative state sinecures and personal enrichment, based on the imposition of low pay and crushing levels of exploitation through the fragmentation of the working class.



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