

Scottish National Party woos Labour voters

Steve James
1 May 2014

Addressing the Scottish National Party's (SNP) last annual conference before September's referendum on Scotland's independence from the United Kingdom, SNP leader Alex Salmond, and his deputy, Nicola Sturgeon, devoted much of their remarks to supporters and members of the Labour Party.

A "Yes" vote did not amount to support for the SNP, they assured Labour voters. Sturgeon told the conference "To every Labour voter in the country, I say this. The Yes campaign is not asking you to leave your party. Instead, it offers you the chance to get your party back." Sturgeon noted that a number of middle-ranking Scottish Labourites had broken ranks with the official Labour line, and were now supporting independence.

Scottish First Minister Salmond elaborated, "Independence will be good for Scottish Labour" because Labour, "freed from Westminster control, will have the chance to return to its core values: many of which we in this party share". With a general election due in 2015, Salmond even suggested the next Scottish government "may be the SNP. It may be Labour. It may be a coalition."

The SNP's appeal to current and former Labour supporters is based firstly on their assessment that the vote in September appears finely balanced.

Although the "Yes Scotland" camp consistently poll less than the "Better Together" campaigners for a "No" vote, poll after poll suggests the gap is closing.

One recent survey for TNS showed "Yes" polling 29 percent against a 41 percent "No". This 12 percent margin was down from 19 percent last September. Over the same period, the numbers of those planning to vote was estimated to have increased from 65 to 74 percent. A Survation poll put figures 38 percent for independence against 46 percent opposed, while an ICM poll registered them at 39 percent to 42 percent. Stripping out the "don't knows" leaves 48 percent in favour of separation against 52 percent opposed.

There remains widespread distrust of the SNP's reckless, secessionist project. Independence would mean the possible imposition of a new border, an as yet unknown currency, certain and immense disruption and fragmentation of all areas of social provision coupled with the unleashing of ever more toxic regionalism as the London and Edinburgh governments fight over the most favourable carve up of UK assets. It would be a thoroughly reactionary development that would reverberate internationally.

The fact that the SNP, with the slavish assistance of the entire ex-left fraternity who have thrown their resources into separation, has been able to close the gap is entirely because of the overtly right-wing character of the official "Better Together" campaign.

"Better Together" comprises the Conservative and Liberal Democrat ruling coalition and the Labour Party, chaired by Labour's former chancellor, Alistair Darling.

A series of interventions from British Prime Minister David Cameron and chancellor George Osborne saw Cameron appeal to "quiet patriots" to save the United Kingdom while Osborne arrogantly dismissed the SNP's proposal for a currency union based on the continued use of the pound and the Bank of England. But as the Conservatives have just one Westminster MP in Scotland and are deeply unpopular, their interventions have benefited the "Yes" rather than the "No" camp. They also damaged the Labour Party which is rightly perceived as much too close to the hated Tories.

Labour itself has been riven with faction fighting over the referendum. It had held out the possibility of greater devolution as an alternative to separation but a number of unnamed Westminster and Holyrood MPs have reportedly opposed this.

In the event, both former Prime Minister Gordon Brown and the party's Devolution Commission have

advocated more devolution in the event of a “No” victory. Brown has proposed that the Scottish parliament be written into a UK constitution, while the commission has proposed greater tax and welfare varying powers for Scotland to allow it to raise up to 40 percent of its own spending, with a reduction in central government funding.

In an effort to distance itself from the Tories, Labour issued its “United with Labour” plans. This claimed continuity with Labour’s Scottish founder Keir Hardie and the welfare state introduced under the 1945 post-war Labour administration. “United with Labour” also stated “we all share the same common ground, from Liverpool to Livingston, Belfast to Birmingham.”

But the lie to this was given by the document’s insistence that Labour would, under the flag of a “moral economy” seek to “bring the UK budget back into surplus by exercising fiscal discipline and using the proceeds from the sale of the people’s stake in Lloyds and RBS to help repay the national debt”. Why anyone would support this commitment to further austerity, privatisation and the general interests of the financial oligarchy, did not appear to have entered the authors’ heads.

This makes the SNP’s claim that Labour in Scotland “liberated” from the UK party would be more left-wing entirely specious.

Until the election of David Cameron in 2010, the British government was run by a Labour leadership, many of whose leading figures either were Scottish, or had a Scottish political base, including both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Brown retains a Westminster seat for the Scottish constituency of Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath.

During and after Labour’s 13 years in power, from 1997 to 2010, not a squeak of protest emerged from Scottish Labour to indicate fundamental disagreements with the war policy and right-wing social policy outlined by the Blair and Brown administrations.

In local government, Scottish Labour since 2008, no less than in England and Wales, has ruthlessly cut social spending, passing on cuts imposed by the SNP government in behalf of the Tories. Both Labour and the SNP have sacked tens of thousands of public-sector workers and cut back social care to the minimum. Scottish Labour has championed Labour’s anti-welfare right-wing charge.

But the “left” Scottish Labour myth fits closely with the SNP’s key fabrication that, freed from Westminster control, Scotland would offer higher levels of social welfare.

The argument is a variation of claims made by the Labour Party itself during the 1980s and 1990s, a component of its refusal to lead any struggle against the hated Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. Labour and the trade unions claimed there was a “democratic deficit” whereby Scotland returned more Labour MPs, but still ended up ruled by a right-wing Conservative government.

In reality, the policy of devolution, long demanded by the regional capitalists and its allies in Labour and the trade union bureaucracy reflected the accelerating global organisation of production. For Scottish capitalism, isolated on the fringes of Europe, and increasingly dominated by banking, oil and finance, devolution offered the chance to cut its own investment deals internationally, while retaining its lucrative and essential relations with Britain.

At the same time, the long-standing promotion of devolution or Home Rule within the framework of the UK, by the Labour and trade union bureaucracy served to weaken and disorient the working class across Britain. The problem for Labour is that the regional policy it has championed has so benefited the pro-independence SNP that the United Kingdom now faces disintegration.

In reality, no faction of the official “Yes” or “No” camps speaks in any sense in the interests of the working class. This does not mean that workers should stand aside.

The SEP calls for a “No” vote—not on the basis of defence of the United Kingdom of bankers and billionaires, but from the standpoint of creating the best conditions for the development of a united class struggle against the Cameron administration in London and its junior partner in Edinburgh in the fight for a workers government based on socialist policies.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact