

Former Scottish Socialist Party leader promotes nationalism in referendum campaign

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Former Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) leader Tommy Sheridan has taken to the road as part of the campaign for a “Yes” vote in the September 18 referendum on Scottish independence. Headlined “Hope over fear,” Sheridan’s tour has been backed by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). The SWP, like most of the pseudo-left, is fully behind the project of creating a separate capitalist state in Scotland.

The specific political function of Sheridan’s tour is to sell separatism to workers who might otherwise balk at a yes vote—due to their hostility to the right-wing politics of the SNP or their fears that sowing of national divisions will weaken their struggles against the employers.

The tone is unadulterated nationalism. Saltire flags adorn the stage, the speakers’ podium and even occasionally Sheridan’s T-shirt. Add to this Sheridan’s bilious full volume delivery designed to beat his audience into submission.

At a recent meeting in East Kilbride, Sheridan began his speech with a reference to Mel Gibson’s ludicrous and ahistorical *Braveheart*, declaring that the referendum was about “Freedom.” Tyranny “comes in many forms,” he said, noting that “since 1951 Scotland has had to endure 35 years of Tory government that we never voted for”—something that could be said for many other regions of the UK and about most British workers.

Sheridan’s speeches invariably refer to high levels of inequality, only to misuse statistics to reinforce his claim that all the problems facing the working class in Scotland can only be resolved through separation from England. Rather than indicting capitalism, he asserted that values in Scotland conflicted with those in the rest

of the UK. “We reject that philosophy that says that services should be in the hands of private property. We believe in public services, free education, free health,” he declared.

Sheridan never identifies the “we” he speaks of. Rather, he simply uses the attacks waged by capital on the working class to argue for... an alliance with Scottish capital. His references to “brothers and sisters,” and “working people” are therefore used interchangeably with the nationalists’ favoured formulation of “the people of Scotland.”

In one speech posted on the Internet, Sheridan complained bitterly that Scotland had been paying more to the UK for the past 32 years than it had been getting back. This showed that people in Scotland were not beggars, “but self-sufficient.”

In a newspaper interview Sheridan was more explicit, declaring, “We’re constantly told how Scotland is stronger and better together as part of the United Kingdom. But if you look at Scotland’s resources, our potential, our talent and what we have achieved as a nation, there is absolutely no argument that can convincingly say Scotland is better off not being an independent country.”

It is possible to argue against Sheridan from the standpoint of what is being included or excluded from such calculations. Such calculations form much of both the official “Yes” and “No” campaigns. More importantly, his is an argument routinely employed by Italy’s *Liga Nord* or Belgium’s *Vlams Belang*. These right wing separatist parties complain that they are subsidising poorer regions of the country and should be free to enjoy their own prosperity.

In line with this, Sheridan is wholly indifferent to the

fate of workers in England and Wales, who make up 56 million inhabitants of this small island after Scotland's five million residents are excluded. When Sheridan refers to the fate of the National Health Service or of the prospects for free education, he alludes to Scotland alone. Everyone else can go to hell.

Equally striking is how Sheridan never, or at least rarely, refers to a single event beyond Scotland's borders. Ruling elites across Europe are responding to the deepest capitalist crisis since the 1930s by imposing austerity. Yet Sheridan claims that Scotland will somehow be different—a redoubt of social-democratic reforms in a sea of neo-liberal reaction. It is not only that he is uninterested in international issues. To place his position in its proper international context is to expose it as a lie.

Under conditions where NATO military aggression against Russia over Ukraine worsens by the day, with the US and Japan threatening China as part of Washington's "pivot to Asia"—and with the Middle East in danger of descending into a regional war—the same holds true of his claims that Scottish separatism offers "the chance to strike a blow against the war monger."

These claims are based upon the Scottish National Party's (SNP) pretence of opposing Trident nuclear weapons and its assertion that it will pursue a foreign policy governed by international law. This pacifist posturing is taken as good coin, according to Sheridan's schema, and the reason is not hard to find. At several meetings Sheridan has shared a platform with SNP Member of the Scottish Parliament, Christina McKelvie.

Consequently, Sheridan's anti-war bombast did not get around to mentioning SNP leader Alex Salmond's recent trip to the United States. Salmond hailed the most aggressive imperialist power on the planet as a "great power" and a "great nation" and subsequently reassured President Obama that in the event of Scottish independence, Washington would have two allies in Britain instead of one.

To have raised such issues would have cut across Sheridan's careful efforts to cultivate his de facto political alliance with the SNP. Indeed, he never issues a word of criticism of the SNP, Scotland's main capitalist party—including its imposition of savage social cuts. Instead, he declares that it is "vital to realise

that September 18 has absolutely nothing to do with whether you support the SNP or whether you like, love or hate Alex Salmond."

The claim that support for independence can be separated from backing the SNP is absurd. The SNP's entire history has been devoted to winning Scottish independence, and no party would draw more confidence from the successful conclusion of its decades-long project. Sheridan knows this and frames his remarks with the intention of, at some future point, establishing a position for himself within the SNP. That is why he has taken pains to state how he is ready to "take my hat off to the membership of the SNP for their years of labour."

In truth, for years Sheridan has acted as an advocate for the SNP—calling for an SNP vote in a 2008 by-election even to the detriment of the candidate of his own barely functioning political vehicle, Solidarity Scotland.

When Sheridan speaks of social questions, it is almost invariably in a national context. It is increasingly rare for the words socialism or capitalism to be uttered—and if so they are only to urge the implementation of a few reformist measures. He has even urged the Labour Party to "rediscover its spinal cord" and "present to the people of Scotland the type of political programme it abandoned two decades ago."

Sheridan's politics are based on unalloyed nationalist demagoguery, to the extent that he has insisted that "internationalism is 'inter' and 'nationalism'...a collective of nationalisms." In this, as with his glorification of the (Scottish) state as the guarantor of almost everything imaginable, he is far closer to Mussolini than he is to Marx, whose rallying cry was, "Workers of the world Unite!"



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