

First televised debate on Scottish independence referendum exposes fraud of “Yes” and “No” campaigns

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On Tuesday evening, Scottish National Party (SNP) leader Alex Salmond and the Labour Party’s Alistair Darling staged a 90-minute televised debate in Glasgow on the referendum on Scottish independence to be held September 18.

The debate exposed the fact that the official “Yes,” or “No” campaigns have nothing to offer working people but deepening austerity, nationalism and war.

The most striking feature of the debate was that the growing economic and political crisis of global capitalism was not even hinted at. Taking place after almost four weeks in which the Israel Defense Forces have brutally bombed Gaza, killing almost 2,000 Palestinians, and in which the US and European Union (EU) are utilising the civil war they instigated in Ukraine to push for confrontation with Russia, these events were not mentioned once.

The parochialism of the entire affair was epitomised in the fact that the debate was only broadcast to viewers in Scotland on the regional STV broadcaster. An online livestream crashed just as the programme got under way due to the high level of demand.

This alone makes a mockery of repeated claims that the referendum is a democratic, inclusive and open process, in which the “people” will decide their future. While those north of the border are able to vote, neither they—nor the tens of millions in the rest of the UK whose futures will be affected just as fundamentally by the result—have any say over events after September 18. Whatever the outcome of the referendum, the real decisions on matters of life and death are controlled entirely by the major corporations which dictate every aspect of life in Britain and globally.

Instead, the debate was the occasion for two equally right-wing politicians, both with long records of

defending the interests of the financial elite, to trade in falsehoods, half-truths and hyperbole.

Darling leads the official “No” campaign, supported by Labour, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats. As Chancellor of the Exchequer until 2010, he is the representative of the Labour government that not only bailed out the banks in the 2008 financial crash with billions in taxpayers’ money, but played a direct role in facilitating the crisis by encouraging rampant speculation, corruption and criminality in the interests of the super-rich.

While Darling was able to make great play of the fact that Scottish finance capital played a significant role in the crisis, he could not answer how Scotland can be “Better Together” with the rest of the UK—the official “No” slogan—when his party, and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government are committed to austerity.

The fact that a man with this record, and with the personality of a provincial bank manager to boot, was selected as the “No” spokesman for the debate speaks volumes. Conservative leader and Prime Minister David Cameron, his Liberal Democrat coalition partner Nick Clegg and Labour leader Ed Miliband are so loathed that they could not appear without severely damaging the pro-union case.

Even so, Darling made clear that his primary concern is the response of the financial markets to the Scottish referendum, and not what it means for the millions who inhabit this tiny island.

There were rightly snorts of derision when Darling claimed that the benefit of the UK was that it meant it is possible to transfer wealth away from the richer areas to the poorer ones. But this derision is one that would be found equally across large parts of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

As for Alex Salmond, the former oil economist for the Royal Bank of Scotland and leader of the official “Yes” campaign largely ditched the pretension that independence is a social democratic, and even, socialist project. While there was the occasional genuflection to anti-austerity sentiment, the First Minister of the Scottish Government spoke as the representative of a layer of the Scottish bourgeoisie and upper middle class whose class interests independence really serves.

Gone was any trace of the SNP’s former claims to anti-militarism. The SNP is now committed to staying in the NATO alliance that is banging the drums of war against Russia. Salmond has stated that an independent Scotland will be a faithful ally of US imperialism, hence the SNP’s willingness to allow nuclear weapons to pass through Scottish waters.

Salmond’s claim that independence would be “best for Scotland” is belied by the fact that the independence being sought is bogus. The “Yes” campaign is committed to keeping sterling, the Bank of England and the monarchy. This meant that Salmond was unable to answer the question why, if the independence campaign wants to end austerity, it is seeking a currency union with the self-same economic and political institutions that are implementing it across the country.

If opinion polls indicated Darling had “won” the debate, this is only because Salmond has to try and sell the chimera of a prosperous, peaceful, classless nation united under capitalism—a circle that cannot be squared.

To the extent that the “Yes” campaign claims to have any interests “independent” of British capital, it is only to make relations with other imperialist powers, whom they hope will seize the opportunity of lower corporate tax rates and the unstated promise of greater working class exploitation post-independence.

That is why the “Yes” campaign is so insistent on Scotland’s right to be part of the European Union, the major vehicle through which the European bourgeoisie are devastating the living standards, democratic rights and essential public services across the continent.

Darling made one brief remark about the Irish and Icelandic financial systems having collapsed following 2008, but this was aimed at undermining the SNP’s claim to be able to manage a financial sector which dwarfs Scotland’s economy. Otherwise, the two were united in their support for the EU, with Darling quipping that they may be campaigning together on the issue some day.

Salmond railed against Scottish “subsidies” to the UK, claiming that Scotland had been paying more in to the UK

treasury than it had got out over the past 30 years and that this “wealth” should be returned.

This demand has been the hallmark of right-wing regionalist and separatist movements across Europe, such as those led by the Lega Nord in Italy, Vlaams Belang in Belgium and Catalan and Basque nationalists in Spain. They all reflect the interests of sections of the regional ruling elite who feel that they are losing financial resources to poorer regions, which are restricting their opportunities to build ties with global finance capital.

When the debate turned to the basic necessities of life for workers, like education, pensions and health care, neither participant had anything to offer. Salmond made great play of the SNP’s abolition of tuition fees for Scottish students, but did not raise the fact that over 100,000 college places have been eliminated. One audience member pointed out that the fee waiver did not apply to all students.

An opinion poll published just before the debate showed 46 percent of voters would back the “No” campaign and 40 percent will vote “Yes”, with 14 percent saying they hadn’t decided.

That support for the “Yes” campaign has gained any traction amongst working people and the youth is entirely the responsibility of the pseudo-left groups. Organisations like the Socialist Workers Party and Scottish Socialist Party consciously work to channel workers behind the Scottish bourgeoisie and blind them to the dangers posed by the rise of nationalism and regionalism.

This was further underscored on the eve of the debate, when all of the major British parties announced an agreement to grant the Scottish Parliament more powers in the event of a “No” vote. This is part of a broader plan to “devolve” power across the UK, creating regional assemblies whose main function will be to divide the working class in order to further drive down wages and conditions.



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