

Socialist Workers Party's Alex Callinicos backs Scottish nationalism

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Britain's Socialist Workers Party's (SWP's) leading theoretician, Alex Callinicos, has authored an article in the latest edition of the *International Socialist Journal* in which he gives unconditional backing for Scottish independence.

"Towards the breakup of Britain" is pure political deception. The core of his argument is that anything which produces the break-up of the British state is progressive. He begins by asserting, "The outcome of the referendum on Scottish independence on 18 September could tear a huge chunk out of the United Kingdom, rendering its very name a joke."

However, his article proves conclusively that such anti-imperialist bluster is purely rhetorical and that the SWP is consciously lining up behind the creation of a minor imperialist state, in direct opposition to the mobilisation of the working class in a struggle against the bourgeoisie.

Callinicos does not deny the fact that Scotland is not, nor has it ever been, an oppressed nation. Instead he lists historic details, culled from the work of others, proving that the Scottish bourgeoisie not only benefited immensely from the Act of Union in 1707, but in the process carried out monstrous crimes all over the world. He quotes writer Neal Ascherson stating, "It's a cliché that the Scots 'punched above their weight' in the empire, and it's misleading. They seldom competed directly with the English or Irish, but established distinct and almost exclusively Scottish fiefdoms: the fur trade, the tobacco trade, the jute industry, the opium business in China, the 'hedge-banking' outfits in Australia, the executive levels of the East India Company.... Scottish capital was thus a full partner in the expansion of British imperialism. This embraced deep involvement in the slave plantations of the Caribbean and American South."

He then concludes, "The deep involvement of Scottish capital in the upward arc of British imperialism makes any attempt to portray the Scottish people as victims of national oppression comparable to that inflicted on the Irish quite implausible. Ordinary people in Scotland have suffered at the hands of the British state no less but also no more than their counterparts in England or Wales."

To all such principled considerations, Callinicos is wholly indifferent.

He makes no mention of the only social force capable of putting an end to imperialism and the capitalist system out of which it emerges: the working class. His bitter hostility to any political intervention by workers is summed up by the fact that the word "socialism" does not appear once in his lengthy article. Instead, he adapts completely to the nationalist framework of the official debate that has been imposed by the ruling elite, hailing the role of the "left" in boosting the pro-independence campaign through the intervention of figures like Tommy Sheridan. Callinicos portrays Scottish separatism throughout as a legitimate expression of opposition to the rightward trajectory of British politics since the coming to power of the Thatcher government.

He makes no attempt to bolster his ludicrous claim that the creation of a Scottish capitalist state would strike a major blow against imperialism. While stating at one point that the break-up of Britain would have "major geopolitical, economic and domestic political consequences," he never bothers to analyse what these would be. In reality, the emergence of an independent Scotland would intensify, rather than reduce imperialist conflicts. As a minor imperialist power, Edinburgh would be compelled to align its fortunes with one of the major powers to pursue its interests on the global stage. Scottish National Party (SNP) leader Alex Salmond has strongly indicated that this power would be Washington.

In addition, the Cameron government in London is planning a referendum on British European Union (EU) membership in 2017, which could result in a British exit. This could produce a situation in which Scotland remains an EU member while its larger neighbour is outside the bloc. The struggle for political and economic influence that would ensue would draw in the remainder of Britain, along with the major European powers, France and Germany.

Callinicos ignores such issues, even while he admits that "no one should imagine that the SNP offers a real alternative

to policies devised in Westminster. On the contrary, Salmond provides neoliberalism lite.... His plans for an independent Scotland to cut corporation tax suggest that, despite the economic catastrophe of the past seven years, low-wage high-export Ireland continues to be a model the SNP seeks to emulate.”

None of this matters to Callinicos, whose sole response is to reassert the puerile claim that the question of whether an independent Scotland should be supported can be reduced to the issue of whether Britain should continue to exist as an imperialist power. “Posed in these terms, the answer is a no brainer: of course it shouldn’t!” he declares.

For him, “self-determination” is a universal demand that can be used to justify any project, no matter how reactionary. “The Scottish people have not suffered national oppression at the hands of the UK state, but they are asserting their right to self-determination. This right cannot be denied them,” he intones.

Leaving aside the problematic issue of how it is possible to deny something that has never been withheld, Callinicos’s embrace of self-determination amounts to explicit support for a programme of balkanisation with extremely reactionary consequences not only in Scotland, but throughout Europe. It was the call for self-determination for the national minorities of Yugoslavia in the 1990s that laid the basis for the bloody civil war and imperialist intervention. His formula that the demand for self-determination must be supported under all conditions implies backing for retrograde regionalist projects promoted in a number of European countries, including the drive for Catalan independence in Spain and the campaigns of overtly right-wing movements such as Italy’s Northern League and Vlaams Belang in the Flemish regions of Belgium. As with the SNP and Scottish separatism, these are championed by prosperous bourgeois cliques seeking to make their own arrangements with international finance capital.

Callinicos admits as much when he notes that “Finance and associated professional services account for more than 13 percent of Scottish GDP and employ 148,000 people, 6 percent of the workforce. Scotland’s life insurance and pensions industry is responsible for 24 percent of UK employment in the sector, even though its population is 8.3 percent of the UK total. The assets of the financial sector amount to twelve and a half times Scottish GDP.”

Little wonder that Salmond, a former economist at the Royal Bank of Scotland, heads the SNP.

“Self-determination” for Callinicos in reality means granting the financial elite free rein to set its own economic and political agenda to meet the needs of the major banks and corporations, wherever this is demanded. He makes this plain with his critique of the SNP for not going far enough

on the issue of currency. He rejects the plan to keep using the British pound which the SNP favours, writing, “This is a problematic policy for any serious project of self-determination, since it would leave Scottish finances subject to monitoring by the Bank of England, which would continue to set interest rates and control monetary policy. This is why the Socialist Workers Party supports an independent Scotland having its own currency.”

The SWP has shifted from being opponents of Scottish separatism to its most ardent proponents. It is a change of course driven by a realisation by the privileged, middle class layers for which it speaks that independence could offer an excellent opportunity to gain access to political influence and financial resources—drawn from the speculative capital swilling around Edinburgh and then channelled via the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood into innumerable academic and governmental sinecures.

In return, the SWP and similar groups will play their part in intensifying the exploitation of the working class through the leading positions they enjoy within the trade union bureaucracy. That is why the trade unions are singled out by Callinicos for preservation as non-Scottish bodies, with his promise that “Socialists on both sides of the border will be working hard to maintain the unity of UK-wide working class organisations.”

This pledge is made as if no one were aware of the unending betrayals imposed on working people by the trade unions over the past 40 years, who will continue to help step up the exploitation of the working class throughout Britain—allowing national divisions to play off one section of workers against another while maintaining corporate discipline on both sides of the border.



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