

Tommy Sheridan's nationalist diatribe in service of Scottish big business

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At a public meeting on the Scottish independence referendum held in the town of Cumbernauld near Glasgow on Monday, former Scottish Socialist Party leader Tommy Sheridan beat the nationalist drum with a speech full of right-wing demagogy.

The event was part of his “Hope over fear” tour in favour of a “yes” vote for the separation of Scotland from the UK, backed by the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP).

On this occasion, Sheridan was joined on the platform by Michelle Thomson, a spokeswoman for Business for Scotland, a coalition of businesses in favour of independence, along with a member of the pro-independence campaign who works in the health service.

As is customary for Sheridan, he appeared on a stage emblazoned with Scottish flags to deliver his remarks. Appealing to the most parochial political sentiments, he railed against Scottish money being spent in England and demanded that “our resources” be taken back.

His citation of indices of social misery was thoroughly dishonest and aimed at promoting his political agenda by presenting all issues in national terms. According to Sheridan, the rise of food banks, increased levels of poverty, the destruction of jobs and the elimination of public services are not the result of the bankruptcy of capitalism, but of England's oppression of Scotland. Thus, when he stated that over a million people in Britain now live off food banks, he had not a word to say about social conditions in England or Wales—even though it is workers living in these parts of the country who make up the majority of this figure.

Sheridan's vision following a “yes” vote is of a prosperous capitalist state. According to him, Scotland enjoys a “centre-left consensus” which embraces all

sections of society. As a result, a “yes” vote would ensure that social reforms could be enacted.

Such an outrageous claim went hand in hand with a virulently nationalist and anti-English programme. He demanded control of “our” oil, attacked various public spending projects in England for using “Scottish” resources, and urged Scotland to be made “a nation once again.”

His anti-English venom reached a high point on the question of nuclear weapons on the river Clyde, when he provocatively suggested, to rousing cheers from his followers, that the Trident nuclear weapons system be relocated to the River Thames in the middle of London, a city of more than eight million people.

He coupled this with an open embrace of Scottish capital, applauding Thomson's remarks and enthusing over her proposals for business.

Thomson declared that the referendum was a great marketing opportunity for Scotland to send a message to global corporations. According to her, purchasing the sort of prime-time coverage Scotland will receive around the referendum of September 18 would normally cost an estimated £1 billion, so it was vital that this was used to send a “positive” message. Tax varying powers and other incentives could encourage businesses to start up and base themselves in Scotland—a reference to the Scottish National Party's programme of corporate tax cuts and subsidies to big business.

The vote on independence was a “democratic” issue, Sheridan asserted, and had nothing to do with politics! He absurdly claimed that a vote for independence would not mean support for the SNP but was all about “our country.”

Sheridan nevertheless praised “SNP members” for keeping the issue of independence “on the agenda.”

Given his recent performances, it would not be surprising if he, sooner rather than later, became an SNP member himself.

Sheridan's complaints over the state of democracy in the UK had nothing to do with the fact that economic, social and political life is entirely controlled by the wealthy elite through the official parties. Nor did he present a word of criticism of the wide range of police state measures brought in by the British government recently, including the expansion of surveillance of telecommunications data, the intimidation of media outlets like the *Guardian* for publishing material from Edward Snowden, or the illegal detention of David Miranda and others.

Instead, the problem was that Scotland had supposedly been oppressed by England for hundreds of years, and it had been sending more taxes to London than it had got back for over 30 years.

The way in which these two issues were combined makes clear that Sheridan's main concern is extending the influence of the Scottish bourgeoisie and privileged middle class layers. In short, the current set-up prevents direct relations being built with the major corporations and international banks by a section of the ruling elite.

To defend these interests, Sheridan indicated that he was in favour of maintaining a Scottish military for the foreseeable future. He also welcomed without comment a proposal that a Scottish defence force be used to intervene in "humanitarian" situations. Throughout this discussion on the military, he uttered not one word on the current situation in Gaza or the aggression being shown towards Russia by the US and its allies over Ukraine.

His hostility to the working class was illustrated when he hailed Iceland as an example to be followed in crisis management. In Iceland following the 2008 financial crash the International Monetary Fund imposed a vicious programme of cuts to social welfare, health care spending and other public services in exchange for a loan to avert state bankruptcy and bail out the banks.

This writer was able to address the meeting from the floor, pointing out that the speeches had been full of nationalist demagoguery and hostility to class politics. Sheridan's claim of a centre-left consensus in Scotland would have to include its major banks, RBS and Bank of Scotland, both of which played a major role in the financial collapse of 2008. He had rejected the working

class as a social and political force, which was shown by his complete disregard for the conditions facing workers outside of Scotland. Finally, the encouragement of separatism in Scotland was finding support among openly right-wing forces throughout Europe and was preparing the ground for a Balkanisation of the continent.

Sheridan's response was to denounce these remarks hysterically as "condescending" and "patronizing". He declared that he did not care which groups "from Norway, Greece or wherever were supporting Scottish independence"—in the process claiming to have never heard of Italy's Northern League. He concluded with a scurrilous attack on the Socialist Equality Party's call for a "no" vote on September 18, asserting that its defence of class unity amounted to support for the right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party and the fascist British National Party.

The event's organisers responded with undisguised hostility to attempts to counteract their unrestrained nationalism. SEP members distributing leaflets outside the public meeting under the heading "Vote No—Fight for a Socialist Britain" were questioned aggressively as to why they were present because it was a "private ticketed event." And in spite of assertions from the platform that campaigners for a "no" vote had been sought to speak, repeated efforts were made to cut short this writer's remarks.

Behind the rhetorical claims of an open, democratic debate, the reality is that Sheridan and his pseudo-left allies want to silence any voice opposing their efforts to provide nationalism with a progressive veneer. Sheridan's insistence on the primacy of the nation, his hostility to the working class, embrace of militarism, his alliance with finance capital and the promotion of national divisions stands closer to the traditions of the far right than it does to socialist internationalism.



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