

Scottish National Party issues its hollow “Declaration of Opportunity”

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On Monday, Scottish National Party (SNP) leader Alex Salmond presented a “Declaration of Opportunity” in Arbroath, following a cabinet meeting of his regional administration.

Coming a month before the referendum on Scottish independence on September 18, the statement was calculated to appeal to nationalist sentiment with its invocation of the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320. Wild ahistorical claims have been made by nationalists that the declaration, which took the form of a letter to the Pope asking for his support against England from a group of noblemen loyal to King Robert the Bruce, was Scotland’s equivalent of the American Declaration of Independence.

Salmond’s own declaration purported to present a case in favour of separation in three areas: protecting the National Health Service (NHS), creating a “fair society,” and tackling the jobs crisis facing young people. It was the latest in an ongoing series of efforts to portray Scottish independence as a left-wing, social-democratic alternative to the current set-up.

This outlook was summed up by well-known Scottish historian Tom Devine, who commented in an interview to the *Observer* in which he came out in support of independence last Sunday, “The Scottish parliament has demonstrated competent government and it represents a Scottish people who are wedded to a social-democratic agenda and the kind of political values which sustained and were embedded in the welfare state of the late 1940s and 1950s.”

The most striking feature of such claims is their parochial character. Under conditions of the deepest crisis of global capitalism since the 1930s, working people are to believe that a new capitalist mini-state offers the basis for a return to the social reformism of the post-war era. This is in spite of the fact that a

fundamental assault on jobs, public services and social spending has taken place throughout Europe and internationally since the onset of the global economic crisis in 2008, illustrating that real power lies with the major global banks and corporations.

It is also false to suggest that Scotland has represented a bastion of social democracy over the past 15 years since the establishment of the parliament in Edinburgh in 1999. Scotland’s major financial institutions, Bank of Scotland and Royal Bank of Scotland, were at the forefront of the financial collapse of 2008 following years of aggressive expansion which the SNP and others backed fully. The result has been the destruction of public services, jobs and the living standards of workers throughout Britain.

The minor social reforms implemented by the devolved parliament, such as the abolition of prescription charges for medicines and the removal of tuition fees for Scottish students at universities in Scotland, are solely thanks to the favourable settlement Edinburgh receives under the Barnett formula whereby its public spending per head of population is almost one-and-a-half times that of other regions in the UK. Even so, the tuition fees “concession” is being paid for by students from other parts of Britain, who have seen fees at Scottish universities raised to £9,000 per year.

Salmond’s attempt to pose as a defender of what is an all-UK system of public health care is particularly grotesque. It comes from the head of a Scottish parliament that has overseen a significant reduction in the health budget in collaboration with the policies of successive Westminster governments, slashed the number of nurses working in hospitals, and merged social care and health services at the cost of thousands of job losses. The SNP has in fact spent over £400 million on private healthcare since coming to power.

Undeterred, Salmond asserted in his remarks on Monday that Scottish independence would “protect our publicly owned, publicly run NHS forever from Westminster privatisation and cuts.”

In reality, the SNP’s commitment to a low tax, cheap labour economy, wholly dependent on the international financial markets and major corporations, means that any claims that independence offers the basis for social reformism are a fraud.

This is demonstrated by the unflinching support within the yes campaign for European Union membership, a move which would oblige an independent Scottish state to carry out the type of “reforms” that have been synonymous throughout the continent with social devastation, poverty and unemployment.

Two factors account for the ability of the SNP to present the reactionary programme of Scottish nationalism as a progressive cause capable of protecting public services and social spending.

The official “no” campaign is so discredited that broad sections of workers rightly treat the claims of its representatives on these issues with contempt. Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have all presided over the imposition of vicious austerity measures throughout Britain, including the elimination of the right to publicly funded healthcare through the Health and Social Care Act, devastating attacks on social welfare benefits, and the wholesale privatisation of healthcare, education and other core public services.

The attempts on Monday by Labour’s Douglas Alexander, leader of the “Better Together” campaign, to appeal to popular sentiment for the defence of public services and pensions was thoroughly hypocritical. Alistair Darling, who will meet Salmond in another televised debate next week, sought to deliver a similar message in a speech held in Coatbridge at the weekend. The former UK chancellor, who was responsible for the bailout of the banks and the austerity measures brought in by Labour before the party was voted out of office in 2010, had the gall to criticise Salmond for planning “austerity plus” in Scotland and claimed the current set-up could offer more public spending.

On the other hand, a collection of pseudo-left groups, led by Tommy Sheridan and the Socialist Workers Party, the Scottish Socialist Party and the Radical Independence Convention, act as foot soldiers for the

SNP--providing its programme of social reaction with a progressive fig leaf. Assertions that Scottish independence is somehow a “democratic” issue that will facilitate a redistribution of wealth and a fairer society have been repeated endlessly by groups claiming to be socialist. These organisations deny the significance of the globalisation of production, which has undermined all of the national reformist programmes of the post-war period. They speak for a privileged section of the middle class aiming to take advantage of the opportunities for self-advancement that would open up with the creation of a new state.

Salmond returned to the theme of the referendum as a democratic milestone on Monday, declaring in his remarks, “It’s not a decision which will be dictated by me or the media, politicians or the press, by campaign groups or coalition government; by the elites in Edinburgh or Westminster. We will all be equal before the ballot box. True popular sovereignty will come to Scotland.”

In truth the referendum campaign has been dominated by the encouragement of nationalist and regionalist politics that are utterly hostile to the democratic demands of the broad majority of workers for jobs, a decent standard of living and an end to austerity. Such basic necessities of life are incompatible with the private ownership of the means of production under capitalism, and can only be achieved by a unified movement of the working class built on a socialist and internationalist programme.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that a precondition for the construction of such a movement is the rejection of all forms of nationalism and separatism, and is calling for a decisive “no” vote in the referendum on 18 September.

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