

How Scotland's Radical Independence Campaign sells nationalism to the working class

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A central feature of the campaign for the Scottish independence referendum on September 18 has been the myriad pseudo-left groups seeking to lend the reactionary separatist agenda of the Scottish National Party (SNP) a progressive cover.

Alongside former Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) leader Tommy Sheridan and his “Hope over Fear” tour, the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) is particularly prominent.

Last Tuesday, the RIC published on its web site results of responses it claimed to have obtained from over 18,000 people during its campaign for a “yes” vote. The RIC claimed to have found overwhelming support for Scottish separatism in some of the poorest communities.

The results are worthless as a genuine measure of sentiment—taken as they were based on conversations with people specifically identified with the Yes campaign. But they indicate very well the political role being played by the RIC, which declares its purpose to be taking the independence message to working-class neighbourhoods where the ruling SNP is viewed with suspicion and hostility.

The survey was issued following what the RIC stated was a mass canvass August 6, following a similar earlier national event June 22. The second supposedly involved nearly 600 canvassers in 42 places, canvassing the views of 5089 voters—meaning that each canvasser apparently spoke to around eight people. The RIC speaks of “a huge number of undecided” in this unrepresentative survey before citing “a healthy majority for Yes.”

In any event, the result was utilised to proclaim that independence is a demand favoured by the working class, in order to conceal the actual pro-business agenda on which it is being fought. The *Scotsman*, for example, reported the findings as a survey of 18,000 people “in

working class communities” and “almost two-thirds of voters in favour of independence once the undecideds were stripped out.”

Jonathan Shafi, co-founder of the RIC, said: “These are Labour strongholds. We are absolutely confident that if we can mobilise these votes we can win,” while Robin McAlpine, director of the Jimmy Reid Foundation, declared, “The No campaign has already lost traditional working class Scotland. Traditional Labour heartlands are breaking from the official Labour line.”

The RIC launched the campaign drive in the wake of the televised debate between SNP leader Alex Salmond and Labour’s Alistair Darling. In a bid to reassure the financial markets that an independent Scotland would act in its interests, Salmond had dropped all his usual references to social reformism.

The RIC responded by seeking to distance itself from Salmond in order to cover for the SNP’s right-wing politics. But the truth is that the RIC shares all of the SNP’s core positions. Like the nationalists, the issue of Scottish separatism is promoted at the exclusion of all others. This is illustrated starkly by the fact that the RIC has not published a single statement on the crisis in Ukraine or the latest US intervention in Iraq, while the only time that Israel’s killing of over 2,000 Palestinians was hinted at in an article was part of a comment urging a “yes” vote in the referendum so that an independent Scotland could join the anti-Israeli boycott campaign.

This is itself a reactionary policy that blames all Israelis for the policies of the Israeli government, and supports the creation of a truncated Palestinian mini-state. Moreover, for the RIC the role played by Israeli nationalism and the terrible tragedy suffered by the Palestinians due to their domination by bourgeois nationalist tendencies count for absolutely nothing when it comes to estimating the likely

impact of the proposed breakup of the UK and their espousal of Scottish separatism. People are simply told that the future will be bright and sunny—so long as they don't wear tartan-tinted glasses.

Another revealing incident demonstrating that the RIC and the SNP are virtually indistinguishable was the decision by Leanne Wood, leader of the Welsh nationalists Plaid Cymru, which is linked to the SNP, to give a talk at an RIC event last month.

The RIC has combined an embrace of nationalism with encouraging all manner of identity politics—Women for Independence and Youth for Independence being the largest. Raymie Kiernan in the *Socialist Worker* wrote ecstatically, “Groups have been formed bringing people together by profession, nationality, sexuality, ethnicity and more.” A joint leader of Scots Asians for Independence commented, “Pro-independence groups have been formed by Chinese, Africans, Arabs and all these different groups...”

The one criterion on which no one is brought together is that based on the independent political interests of the working class, as distinct from those of the bourgeoisie and its privileged hangers-on.

Such politics flow directly from the RIC's origins in the disintegration of the Scottish Socialist Party in 2006, when Sheridan was removed and a faction fight broke out over his personal life. Reduced to a rump following the collusion of the party leadership with the right-wing press during Sheridan's trial, the SSP concluded an alliance with the Greens, various “left” members of the SNP, the International Socialist Group (ISG), a right-wing split from the SWP, and a collection of small Stalinist groups to form the RIC.

Its two conferences, held in Glasgow in November 2012 and 2013, were used as a platform to ditch any lingering association with socialism and adopt wholesale the nationalism of the SNP. Salmond welcomed the group's emergence as an important development in the pro-independence campaign.

Radical Independence's specific function of combating opposition to separatism in the working class was explicitly acknowledged in a 2012 issue of the *Scottish Left Review*, published by the Jimmy Reid Foundation that is aligned with the RIC.

For such bitter middle class ex-radicals, no restraint can be placed on their own personal advancement by political issues of principle. They wrote, “This is bigger than party politics or personal differences. No, this is not the left orthodoxy of the post-war years, the socialism mistrustful

of nationalism. It is a new left orthodoxy for a specific place at a specific time. This is the radical cause of our generation.”

It is not possible to read such lines without a feeling of anger at the cynical dismissal of a “mistrustful” view of nationalism, a deeply rooted hostility felt by millions of workers to the rallying cry of the bourgeoisie everywhere when it urges economic sacrifice or champions war. An insistence on class unity and solidarity is no more. In its place there is an “orthodoxy for a specific place at a specific time,” i.e., the embrace of Scottish nationalism by a tiny layer of the privileged middle class under conditions of growing inter-imperialist conflicts and the possible creation of a new mini-imperialist low corporate tax enclave in Scotland.

Growing sections of workers are aware of the social reaction that would result from such a development. Hence the increasingly desperate efforts of the pseudo-left to overcome such fears by endowing Scottish nationalism with a progressive and even “left” content.

As Graham McIver, a member of Sheridan's Solidarity group, admitted in a moment of unusual candour at the first Radical Independence conference in 2012, “People in this room, people on the left, people out there on picket lines don't share our view of an independent Scotland. Many of these comrades will be beside us on marches and picket lines. They believe in the unity of the British working class, they dismiss some of us who are for independence as useful stooges of the ruling class.”

A more apt description of the RIC would be difficult to find.



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