

Second televised debate on Scottish independence: A dialogue of bankrupts

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The second televised debate within three weeks between the Scottish National Party's Alex Salmond and the Labour Party's Alistair Darling was a revolting affair. Its bitter exchanges were almost all over the issues of monetary policy, taxation and oil revenues—exposing the referendum campaign on Scottish independence as a conflict between rival bourgeois factions over the division of resources and the right to reap the spoils from the exploitation of the working class.

The leader of the SNP and Labour's former Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time of the financial crisis in 2008 met previously in a debate on August 5, broadcast in Scotland only. But it became apparent that the consequences of the September 18 vote were of strong interest to many in Britain and internationally, leading to the second debate being televised on the BBC News channel around the world.

Far from being concerned with the needs of working people, both politicians are firmly oriented to the major banks and global corporations.

Salmond stated in his opening address that “the world is watching” Scotland, by which he meant the global investment funds and big business he hopes to attract to an independent Scotland through tax cuts and a low-wage economy. It was his attempted pitch to this constituency which saw all references to social reforms expunged from the first television debate. After that disastrous performance, he had changed tack again: Hence his claim to be pledged to defending the National Health Service, along with other examples of hollow social rhetoric.

Nevertheless, the fact is that much time was devoted to a repetition of the dispute over whether an independent Scotland would use the pound sterling in a currency union with Britain—with Salmond declaring

that this was the best option and Darling refusing to agree to it. Salmond threatened that a failure to conclude a deal would result in Edinburgh abandoning any liability for its portion of British state debt.

This was only one issue during which the two ended up shouting angrily at each other. Salmond at one point denounced Darling for daring to “lecture” him on economics when he had presided over such a devastating financial crisis. But he has no reason to talk. In 2008, all of the political parties agreed to impose the demand of the ruling class that all of the state's resources be used to support a collapsing financial system. It is unthinkable that now, more than five years later, under conditions of an increasingly unstable global economy and deepening tensions between the major powers, that a future government in London or Edinburgh would not offer its fealty to the major banks and corporations once again. The burden of such policies would fall overwhelmingly on the working class throughout Britain.

Darling was able to retort at one point that the SNP's programme for independence was to maintain a 3 percent lower rate of corporation tax in Scotland than the rest of the UK, but this was hardly a theme he could elaborate upon.

With the support of so-called “left” pro-independence campaigners such as the Radical Independence Campaign and Scottish Socialist Party, the aim of the referendum campaign has been to transmit the divisions being stoked between rival bourgeois cliques into the working class and to call on Scottish workers to take their stand behind Scottish capital. The catastrophic consequences of such politics, if not opposed, were pointed to by the final question from the audience in Monday's debate, when the two politicians were asked about how the divisions produced by the campaign

would be dealt with after the vote.

Salmond, for his part, took pains to always speak of “the people of Scotland” collectively exercising “sovereignty” in the vote. This is the standard ruse of all those seeking to conceal the class divisions within society. For his part, Darling was just as keen to pitch the issue of the “Scottish people” benefiting from the economic and military strength provided by membership of the United Kingdom.

The claim that a Scottish government would have complete freedom to act as the “people” wish is belied by the pro-independence campaign’s own programme. The currency union with the rest of Britain being proposed would ensure that fiscal policy would still be enforced by the Bank of England. Moreover, even if some other currency arrangement were made, joining the EU would require structural reforms and vicious austerity to comply with the bloc’s stability criteria like those in Greece, Spain and Ireland.

The dominant role the major banks and corporations would continue to play in an independent Scotland was revealed on the question of oil. When Salmond cited total wholesale value with reference to oil reserves in the North Sea, Darling was compelled to point out that governments don’t receive the wholesale price but only the taxes. The oilfields are owned by major transnational corporations, which make multi-billion profits annually.

Both politicians sought to conceal their equally right-wing credentials and appeal to broader layers with insincere promises. In his opening remarks, Salmond raised “18 years of Thatcherism,” “illegal wars,” and austerity as reasons to vote for independence. He failed to explain how such rhetoric squared with the SNP policy of joining NATO, building up a Scottish Army and its collaboration with the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition to force through its share of austerity policies—and the programme of tax cuts, low wages and reduced public spending which corresponds perfectly with the traditions of Thatcher.

The only reason Salmond felt able to get away with such dishonest posturing was that he faced Darling, a representative of the British financial elite, widely hated by working people as the man who presided over the lax regulatory system which contributed significantly to the 2008 banking collapse. He then oversaw the implementation of the bailout, before

imposing the initial austerity measures taken by Gordon Brown’s Labour government prior to being voted out of office in 2010.

Darling outrageously sought to adopt the position of a defender of publicly funded health care through the NHS, while Salmond blamed the British parliament in London for initiating a privatisation drive. Salmond neglected to mention that his SNP administration, which has held power in Edinburgh since 2007, including full control over health care policy, has spent £400 million on private health care.

The only response Darling had to Salmond’s lying claims that independence would allow Scotland to protect the NHS, jobs and public services was that if the result was a “no” vote, the Scottish parliament would be given more powers. These would include more tax varying and welfare spending responsibilities, part of a broader campaign by Labour throughout Britain to promote regionalism.

As has become the norm for the official campaign, the international implications of a vote for Scottish secession were left unmentioned. The BBC reported that the debate was trending on Twitter in Spain, where a non-binding referendum on Catalan independence has been planned for early November.

Regionalist movements in Belgium, Spain, Italy and other European countries would be strengthened considerably in their push to establish their own relations with global finance capital and sow divisions among working people. The redrawing of borders across a continent which was the centre of two imperialist wars in the last century carries with it the real danger of open military conflict, as the example of the Balkans in the 1990s shows.



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