

Veteran Scottish nationalist Jim Sillars denounces fight for socialism

Steve James
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A long-time apologist for Scottish nationalism, 76-year-old Jim Sillars has been a member of parliament for both the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party (SNP). In the 1970s, he was a founding member of the short-lived Scottish Labour Party and a member of the 79 Group within the SNP, tasked with ditching the party's "Tartan Tory" image.

He was one of the architects of the SNP's "independence in Europe" policy. He fell out with SNP leader Alex Salmond over tactical disputes, centred on Salmond's campaign for leadership of the SNP, and lost his parliamentary seat in Glasgow Govan in 1992.

Sillars is a newspaper columnist and spent 14 years as the assistant general secretary of the Arab British Chamber of Commerce, whose interests inevitably centre on oil. The man, in short, is a practised opportunist, a leading political representative of Scottish bourgeois interests, known and respected by both leading parties, considered a man of substance in board rooms, trade unions and newspaper editorial offices.

He came out of retirement to campaign for a "Yes" vote in the September 18 referendum on Scottish independence. He has taken to the road, in a converted truck named after his late wife Margo McDonald, to campaign in working-class areas for separation. He has shared platforms all over Scotland with the Scottish Socialist Party, who share his rotten politics.

A recent meeting in Glasgow, at which Sillars spoke alongside members of the SNP, the Radical Independence Campaign and longstanding nationalist campaigners, gave a flavour of his cynical approach.

Sillars outlined his journey from Labour to the SNP when he became convinced that "we [referring to Scots] are a minority living inside a majority. The gulf between this minority and that majority politically and

philosophically has been widening all the time I have been involved in politics."

He went on, "I came out to campaign because the working class in Scotland is a majority, no doubt about it. If we get out and campaign we will get a yes vote based on the majority of the working class. They are very important people."

Then Sillars got to the crux of the matter, pronouncing, "I want to address the oil."

Sillars believes new oil is about to be discovered. "There is oil and gas in the Clyde and the Solway, which has been known about since 1981 and kept secret," he said, because of Ministry of Defence demands that no oilrigs cluttered their naval training areas and transit routes.

Independence, according to Sillars, offers a new bonanza in which "Glasgow will become the Aberdeen of the West. Prestwick Airport is waiting to become a helicopter base. So for Glasgow, Renfrewshire, Dumbartonshire, right down to North Ayrshire it could be the boom period for us."

"That's all available to us," he went on, "if we vote yes. If we vote no that oil and gas remains where it is and Trident will continue to sail and all the unemployed folk will not have jobs."

This is extraordinarily cynical. Moving Trident missiles and submarines out of Scotland merely moves them to England. Exploiting oil in the Clyde will only benefit the Scottish capitalists, the oil majors and nationalist operators like Sillars.

In opposition to this, Socialist Equality Party member Linda Slattery intervened in the questions at the Glasgow meeting.

"I am from England and I am a member of an international party," she said. "My question is how can the creation of a new nation-state further the cause of

socialism and help prevent another war? And what's wrong with fighting to unite the working class internationally to overthrow capitalism?"

Slattery explained that she came to Scotland to "campaign for a No vote as part of the struggle for world socialism."

Sillars' response was apoplectic. He complained, "I have had a lifetime of lectures like this. You are ideologically and philosophically wrong. I have listened to folk like you for a long time. All this stuff about destroying the British state and uniting the international working class...you are NOT ON," he yelled.

Such considerations are certainly anathema to Sillars. Earlier this year he published a book, *In Place of Fear II: A Socialist Programme for an Independent Scotland*, titled in reference to British Labourite Aneurin Bevan's 1952 document *In Place of Fear*. Bevan's work centred on his insistence that through the Labour Party and the trade unions, capitalism could be regulated in the interests of working people. Sillars' intention is to use a smattering of social promises to aggressively advance the interests of Scottish-based capital.

He is aware of the basic weakness of his position. "A small country with an open economy such as Scotland's cannot escape from the world in which capital has such a powerful position," he states. He then outlines a series of state-backed measures designed to ensure that, through independence, Scottish-based capital will be able to chisel a greater share of the exploitation of the working class than at present.

Sillars insists on the defence of financial parasitism. Despite the 2008 crash and the humbling of Scottish-based banks RBS and HBOS, according to Sillars, "Scotland still ranks high in the European league for funds under management. Enhancing the education and skill levels of our people will keep us in that top group."

His main consideration is oil. He calls for a Scottish National Oil Corporation (SNOC) to claim 10 percent of oil profits, while offering 30 percent of SNOC to Scottish-based financial institutions. He proposes a Scottish North Sea Oil Directorate to ensure Scottish companies get "their proper share" of North Sea decommissioning work.

He has little time for opponents of "fracking," or

hydraulic fracturing, the dangerous process whereby gas is extracted deep underground and which has rendered areas of the United States uninhabitable. According to Sillars, "opponents of fracking can be ignored. They have already engaged in the usual scaremongering."

Sillars offers only a sprinkling of social measures as a cover, promising "jobs, jobs, jobs," based on oil and limited state measures. But he nastily insists, "The free bus pass will no longer apply to those aged between 60 and 64. This will not save a great deal, £10 million a year, but you can do a lot with that elsewhere."

He also calls for a 15,000-strong Scottish Defence Force.

Occasionally Sillars stretches for the truly bizarre. Seeking a pretext to claim half the Royal Navy's new aircraft carrier force during negotiations for independence, he writes that the "converted aircraft carrier, the Robert Burns, will be modelled on the Africa Mercy Hospital Ship, but will provide medical care on a far larger scale."

Sillars is an old nationalist operator in a hurry. Like significant layers of Scottish businesses and the upper middle class, he sees the referendum as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get hold of the machinery of the state in order to get richer quicker. This is the basis of his sudden animation—and of his alliance with ex-left tendencies such as the Scottish Socialist Party, the Radical Independence Campaign *et al*, none of whom have a problem with his denunciation of the revolutionary perspective of "destroying the British state and uniting the international working class."



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