

Possible “yes” vote in Scotland referendum provokes split in UK Conservative Party

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British Prime Minister David Cameron suffered a parliamentary defeat on Friday over the “bedroom tax”. The tax penalises those in receipt of housing benefit judged to have too much living space by making them pay for “spare” capacity, or forcing them to move to smaller accommodation.

The unprecedented defeat—by a majority of 75—has less to do with parliamentary opposition to the punitive tax than it does a gathering political crisis over the September 18 referendum on Scotland’s independence from the UK.

The latest opinion polls show that support for Scottish independence is now ahead for the first time ever, with just over a week to go. A YouGov poll commissioned by the *Sunday Times* shows that the “yes” vote now leads by 51 percent to 49 percent. It means that the “no” campaign has lost the 22-point lead it had enjoyed in just one month.

The overturn is largely the result of efforts to portray Scottish independence as a blow against austerity and militarism pioneered by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, with the support of the Labour Party. Scottish National Party leader Alex Salmond made great play of the “yes” campaign’s pledge to end welfare cuts and to remove nuclear weapons from Scotland in his recent second televised debate with “no” spokesperson, former Labour Chancellor Alistair Darling.

In reality, the SNP’s drive for independence is predicated on exactly the same neo-liberal nostrums it formally condemns. It argues that by separating from an ailing British economy, and slashing corporation tax, Scotland can become a prime location for the major corporations.

Such a policy means forcing workers in Scotland into competition with those in the rest of the UK, further

pushing down wages and conditions. But the reactionary implications of separation are being deliberately concealed by the pseudo-left groups, who dress independence and the SNP in progressive, even socialist colours.

The biggest weapon in the hands of the “yes” campaign, however, is the official “no” campaign. The Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Labour cannot put forward a single positive reason for preserving the 300-year union between England and Scotland. Their policies have made the UK one of the most socially unequal countries in the world. All are committed to further austerity and to new wars of aggression.

As the prospect of Scottish separation becomes a real possibility, the pound has been falling against the dollar and the euro, as financial traders take fright. Meanwhile, there is growing talk of a leadership challenge against David Cameron, should he turn out to be the prime minister who presided over the break-up of the United Kingdom.

It is in this febrile atmosphere that last week’s parliamentary vote was held. A private members bill to modify the bedroom tax, sponsored by Liberal Democrat MP Andrew George, was passed by 306 to 231.

Liberal Democrats and Labour joined ranks to support the bill, which they hope will stem the “yes” tide. Labour claimed that it was proof that the Tories “could be beaten”, and therefore it is not necessary for Scotland to break away. The party also pointed to the fact that several SNP MPs had stayed away from the vote, to argue that the Scottish Nationalists could not be trusted.

For their part, having supported the implementation of the tax, the Liberal Democrats now hope their change in line will salvage their own collapse in poll

ratings.

The bill, which is unlikely ever to become law, in fact makes only a minor amendment to the tax. It will exempt disabled people who need a spare bedroom, and those for whom smaller accommodation cannot be found. Everyone else will have to pay, or fall into arrears and lose their home.

Nonetheless, with four Liberal Democrat cabinet ministers voting against the government of which they are members, there were angry claims from some Tory MPs that the coalition was effectively over.

More significant was the sizeable rebellion Cameron suffered at the hands of his own party. Seventy Conservative MPs defied instructions to back the government, and absented themselves from the vote. One Tory MP voted against her party.

It is little over a fortnight since Douglas Carswell MP defected from the Tories to join the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). The Tories have been haemorrhaging support to the anti-European Union party for months. Carswell's defection has forced a by-election in his Clacton seat in October. With UKIP expected to win, there is increasing talk of a leadership challenge to Cameron amongst his own backbenchers.

Cameron has already had to publicly reject suggestions that he should resign from office in the event of a "yes" vote. Arguing that the independence referendum is not about political leaders but is solely about "the future of Scotland", he "emphatically" ruled out standing down. But according to the *Independent* discussions are already taking place amongst Tory MPs as to a potential leadership challenger. It cited one "senior Tory MP" stating that the move "will take place immediately," if the referendum goes in favour of independence. Cameron's position under such circumstances "will be terminal," he said. The newspaper also quoted a former government minister stating, "Losing Scotland would be a traumatic event, a horror show that David Cameron could not possibly survive."

The implications of separation go far beyond Cameron's political future. The *Economist* described the prospect as making for a "horribly complicated divorce." Commenting on the pounds tumble, analysts at BNP Paribas warned of "heightened uncertainty heading into the referendum."

They added, "A 'yes' vote would lead to prolonged

uncertainty over the agreement of currency union, institutional arrangements, and debt negotiation. In this context, GBP [pound sterling] volatility will spike if past history is anything to go by."

There are suggestions that the 2015 general election may have to be postponed for one year. The SNP had previously said that it should be held as normal. Scotland would elect its 59 MPs in Westminster as usual, but they would only serve a 10-month term until Scotland became officially independent on March 24, 2016. But some in the SNP now state that the election should be put back due because a "yes" vote would result in "a very intense period of negotiation between the UK government and the Scottish government."

Others, including Conservative Lord Flight, have suggested that there should be no presence of Scottish MPs at Westminster at all following a "yes" vote.



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