

Scottish National Party benefits from Labour's collapse

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The Scottish Labour Party is facing sharply falling membership and electoral humiliation. Its leader, Johann Lamont, has resigned.

Lamont's departure followed months of tension with the party leadership in London. These erupted in the aftermath of the September 18 referendum on Scottish independence, during which Labour campaigned alongside the Conservative and Liberal Democrat government in Westminster for a No vote.

Lamont, a member of the Scottish parliament (MSP) from Glasgow, complained to the pro-Labour *Daily Record* tabloid that "the Labour Party must recognise that the Scottish party has to be autonomous and not just a branch office of a party based in London."

Labour is now sharply divided over the extent to which it should now advocate much greater devolution in Scotland. The referendum resulted in a No vote by 55 to 45 percent. The last days of the campaign saw Labour, Conservative and the Liberal Democrat parties pledge greater powers to the Scottish Assembly, as an alternative to outright independence.

Prior to the referendum, Lamont established a commission that called for increased tax varying powers. She was reported to have demanded that these include income tax, but Labour leader Ed Miliband rejected her demands. Lamont was also said to have been barred by Miliband from condemning the much-hated "bedroom tax" which reduces housing-support payments to welfare claimants with spare rooms, a measure which the Scottish National Party (SNP) attacked and exploited in order to cast itself as a left alternative.

Two former Labour Scottish First Ministers—Henry McLeish and Jack McConnell—backed Lamont. McLeish warned that Labour in Westminster did not have a clue "about the realities of Scottish politics."

Lamont's stance on the "bedroom tax" is as fraudulent as that of the SNP, which made only the barest changes in the notorious measure as a pre-election ploy to cover its right-wing tax-cutting programme. As Labour's leader in Scotland, the little-known Lamont has offered no hint of opposition to the devastating wave of welfare cuts and benefit sanctions that are reducing millions across Britain to poverty and destitution. But it is a marker of how determined Labour is to establish itself as the party of austerity that even the most minor concession, aimed at averting major electoral losses, was too much for the Miliband leadership.

The result is that, even while the SNP lost the vote on independence, it now threatens to wipe out Labour in most of its 41 Westminster seats in Scotland in next year's general election. This would deprive the party of any chance of forming a governing majority. Another poll suggested that Labour's contingent in the Scottish parliament would be reduced to 31 of 129 seats.

Labour's demise in Scotland, as across Britain, has been long in the making. The party that once dominated the former industrial central belt of Scotland, has lost much of its base in the working class. Membership is said to be as low as 13,000. Since the 1970s, Labour has supervised the destruction of hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs and the semi-privatisation of large swathes of former public services in the few local authorities it still controls. The party of the Iraq war, the 2008 bank bailout and austerity is viewed with contempt, save by operators on the make with a material interest in the opportunities accruing from progression through its pro-business apparatus.

Jim Murphy, Lamont's Miliband-approved successor, epitomises Labour's transformation into a tool of the financial oligarchy.

Murphy is a former president of the National Union of Students. During his reign, student grants were abolished, to be replaced by loans. At the time, according to *Debrett's*, Murphy was also director of the Endsleigh Insurance firm, one of whose services is insurance and financial advice to students. Elected as an MP in 2001, Murphy supported the 2003 assault on Iraq and was appointed Scottish Secretary of State by then Prime Minister Gordon Brown in 2008. He is also a member of Labour's pro-Zionist Friends of Israel group and the Shadow Secretary of State for International Development.

Murphy captured the modern Labour Party's attitude to the working population when he attended a recent Labour gala dinner in Glasgow's Grand Central Hotel. A protest food bank collection had been arranged outside the dinner. Murphy's donation, however, was rejected. A consummate cynic and a darling of the Glasgow media, he commented, "It's really disappointing that the organisers handed back this bag of food and a family may miss out. Helping to feed the hungry should never be used as political football."

Murphy's leading opponent is MSP Neil Findlay. Viewed as someone more capable than Murphy of feigning a left posture, Findlay wrote, "Anyone who thinks that we can take on the SNP from any other position than firmly to their left needs to re-enter this world from cloud cuckoo land".

Findlay's left credentials can be judged by his initial support for Gordon Brown, former Prime Minister and architect of the 2008 bank bailout to the financial oligarchy, to be Labour's new leader in Scotland. Findlay is backed by the trade unions Unison and Unite, both of whom declined to take a position on the referendum and is clearly viewed by much of the Scottish Labour and trade union bureaucracy as more responsive to their interests.

The "No" vote in the referendum showed that large numbers of working people clearly oppose Scottish nationalism, despite deepening distrust of Labour. Two centuries of shared struggles and countless ties between workers in Scotland and England cannot be broken easily.

But Labour is so distrusted in its former heartlands in the central belt of Scotland that Glasgow, North Lanarkshire and Dundee all recorded "Yes" majorities.

Political responsibility for this lies fully with the

pseudo-left tendencies, all of whom portrayed a vote for Scottish independence as a progressive or even socialist development. They present the host of legitimate grievances against the Labour Party, arising from their complete repudiation of any defence of working people's living standards, in Scottish nationalist, pro-SNP, terms. They also claim that a return to "Real Labour", by which is meant Labour's abandoned reformist past, can be carried through, but solely in Scotland.

The immediate result has been to bolster the SNP, with reports that party membership, which entails signing a form and parting with as little as £2, is said to have risen to 80,000 people—up from 25,000 on the eve of the referendum.

More fundamentally, events have confirmed the shift of the middle class pseudo-lefts into the camp of bourgeois politics. In their support for Scottish nationalism they are serving the interest of that section of the financial elite with most to gain from independence or greater fiscal autonomy.

A submission by the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) to the Smith Commission on further devolution stated things rather more explicitly. The SSP document called for "power to borrow on the international money markets" and "devolution of all fiscal and tax-raising powers to Holyrood"—which would place significantly greater resources at the disposal of the Scottish government and its drive to attract globally mobile capital through cheap labour and low taxes.



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