

Scottish National Party prepares for a coalition role at Westminster

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What does the Scottish National Party's (SNP) rejection of former British diplomat Craig Murray as a parliamentary candidate in the upcoming British general election reveal?

Murray came to prominence in 2003, following his outspoken opposition to human rights abuses by the Uzbek government of President Islam Karimov. Murray, then the British ambassador to Uzbekistan, complained that the country's jails held up to 10,000 political or religious prisoners, jailed on trumped-up charges, and that torture by the police and security services was rampant.

Despite a smear campaign organised from the Foreign Office and the intelligence services, Murray refused to back down, causing severe embarrassment to the British government and exposing the filthy activities of a vital US ally in the "war on terror". He was forced out of his job in 2005.

Murray, who has been an SNP member for three years, would seem a useful prize for a party which seeks to present itself from time to time as a left alternative to the Labour Party. Labour was in government during Murray's witch-hunting by the Foreign Office.

Yet, Murray, who had been strongly recommended as a candidate by SNP members in Falkirk and Airdrie, revealed late last year that he has been barred from standing in any constituency. Despite submitting a statement to the party selection board pledging that "I will vote with the SNP group, but my voice within the party will be against any coalition agreement with Labour or Tories," Murray was deemed to be "lacking in group discipline".

Murray appealed the decision. According to the *Herald*, he was asked by the SNP appeals board whether he would vote for the reviled "bedroom tax" if

this was part of a Westminster deal with another party. Murray refused and complained that the board's behaviour was "bullying. I found it a truly unpleasant experience."

He went on to accuse the SNP of briefing the media against him, despite his own preference for keeping quiet about the falling out.

There is no reason to consider Murray's experience as unique.

The SNP has recently recruited tens of thousands of new members. Party membership soared from around 25,000 before the referendum to currently somewhere around 90,000. Many of these have, no doubt, been drawn to the SNP because of its flag waving separatism, but not a few will have fallen for the myth that the perspective of Scottish independence represents a genuine means to alleviate social inequality. This, after all, was the pitch made by the "Yes Scotland" campaign and all the pseudo-left tendencies grouped around the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC), all of whom presented the SNP as a left-of-centre formation.

In the months since the referendum, the Labour Party in Scotland has suffered what appears to be a catastrophic collapse in support. Some estimates of the number of seats the SNP may win from Labour run to almost all Labour's current 41 of 59 Scottish Westminster parliamentary seats. This would give the SNP upwards of 40 seats, and make the party by far the largest party outside of Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, the last of whom it would be closely pressing for third place.

It also makes the SNP a potentially powerful player in the event of a hung parliament in which no party has an overall majority—a likely outcome.

The SNP has clearly decided to ensure that the views

of its newer members are not going to prejudice its chances of cutting a deal with one or other of the leading British parties. If the terms of a deal with Labour—or for that matter the Tories—means reneging on endlessly reiterated promises, particularly popular ones like the abolition of the bedroom tax or the removal of Trident nuclear weapons, then so be it.

This is also the context of the SNP's refusal to come to any agreement with other independence-supporting parties on running joint "Yes" candidates—much to the chagrin of its pseudo-left hangers-on.

Discussions and manoeuvres in and around the SNP for a coalition are well advanced. No doubt a factor in Alex Salmond's resignation from the post of First Minister and the SNP leadership was the party's view that, back in Westminster, Salmond would be better placed to participate flexibly in coalition negotiations. Salmond recently ruled out the incendiary possibility of a second referendum on independence. Instead, he told the *Herald* in his first major interview since his resignation, that the UK general election is about "real home rule, devo to the max or as near federalism as we can get in the UK—that is what was promised and what should be delivered".

The new deputy SNP leader, Stuart Hosie, recently revealed that the SNP had been willing to join a government coalition with Labour in 2010, but "the call didn't come, Labour had decided they wanted to be in opposition". Hosie outlined the essential component of the SNP's negotiating pitch, calling for "substantial new powers for Scotland—that's the key thing—powers that go beyond Smith, where the powers were modest."

The Smith Commission, set up in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, proposed that the Scottish government should control income tax rates and bands, a portion of Value Added Tax revenue, some welfare benefits, air passenger duty and the licensing of onshore oil and gas extraction. In total, the package amounted to about half the cost of public services in Scotland. The SNP sees coalition negotiations as a means to lever further powers. Hosie later demanded, in the light of the recent Stormont House agreement in Northern Ireland, full control over corporation tax.

As in 2010, the SNP's preferred partner is the Labour Party. Pressed repeatedly on the BBC last week, Labour leader Ed Miliband refused to rule out a

coalition with the SNP. However, pro-independence commentator Iain McWhirter noted in the *Herald* that the issues up for negotiation, under frantic conditions, will include the Conservatives' "English votes for English laws" proposal, a referendum on UK membership of the European Union and Trident missile renewal.

McWhirter went on enthusiastically, "[I]t is assumed that the SNP could never form any coalition with the Conservatives. But no one has asked what would happen if the Tories offered the SNP true devo-max—everything except defence and foreign affairs—in exchange for a confidence and supply arrangement in Westminster. ... Could the SNP refuse an offer like that?"

McWhirter clearly thinks refusal would be difficult.

The SNP's rise to a position in which it is close to sitting in, or propping up, a right-wing Labour or Tory-led British government, is a devastating exposure of the pseudo-left, none of whom have concerned themselves to comment on preparations for coalition.



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