

Tommy Sheridan's call for a Scottish National Party vote: An exposure of Britain's pseudo-left

Steve James
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After months of personally urging a vote for the Scottish National Party (SNP), Tommy Sheridan had little difficulty in persuading his Solidarity Scotland group to officially endorse the position for the May 7 General Election.

A large majority of 65 or so delegates voted in favour. A statement by the Solidarity executive described an SNP vote as “a progressive vote against the red, yellow and blue Tories” who “denied Scotland its independence last September.”

The decision is a devastating indictment, not just of Sheridan or his Solidarity fan club, but of the entire pseudo-left fraternity in Britain. It is the logical end product of their universal embrace of Scottish nationalism, as exemplified in the “Hope Over Fear” campaign headed by Sheridan in support of independence for Scotland during last September’s referendum.

Sheridan and Solidarity are openly supporting a party seeking to deepen the assault on the working class, while advancing British imperialist interests worldwide. In power since 2007 in Scotland, and with a majority since 2011, the SNP has faithfully imposed every measure required by the Conservative administration in Westminster. It supports the NATO military alliance and the European Union and centres its entire perspective on slashing corporation tax in order to transform Scotland into a low cost, cheap labour platform for banks and corporations seeking access to the European market.

Such is the collapse of support for the Labour Party in Scotland, polls are predicting the SNP could win over 40 Westminster seats, compared to six it holds currently. One of the most talked about possible arrangements for the next British government is a so-called “confidence and supply” deal between the SNP and Labour, in which the SNP would support Labour measures on a case-by-case basis. The SNP’s only difference with the major Westminster parties is the extent to which they see their role in Westminster as chiselling out more concessions for the Scottish elite for whom they speak.

In response to the Solidarity decision, members of the Socialist Party Scotland (SPS) sought to distance themselves from the party of which they have been a part since 2006, alongside the Scottish supporters of the Socialist Workers Party.

An SPS statement declaring a split with Solidarity claimed, “Tommy Sheridan and Solidarity’s decision marks a significant move away from a principled socialist position and is a step to the right politically”. “We can no longer be associated with the approach that Tommy and a majority of Solidarity members are currently taking,” the SPS added.

The SPS are in fact forever associated with the position taken by

Sheridan, who has been the poster boy for their own rotten political manoeuvring with nationalism in Scotland ever since the 1990s.

The SPS claim that Solidarity’s shift towards the SNP developed only in the aftermath of the referendum fight is not true. Sheridan was, in his younger days, the leading figure in the Militant Tendency in Scotland, leading its campaign against the Poll Tax. With Labour lurching ever rightwards, he pioneered a break with the group’s deep entry strategy into the Labour Party, in what was described as the “Scottish Turn”.

Scottish Militant Labour became the leading force in the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), formed in 1998 through an amalgamation with other pseudo-left groups and Stalinists with the aim of securing positions within the recently formed Scottish Parliament. Sheridan’s break from Labour was from the outset based upon promoting nationalism and utilising the devolved parliament created by Labour to further his political career. The embrace of Scottish independence by the group’s British parent did not prevent Sheridan from then proclaiming his own independence from the Committee for a Workers International, however, nor did it prevent the CWI from maintaining a more informal alliance with Sheridan.

Abandoning any pretence of fighting for socialism in Britain, let alone internationally, the SSP presented Scottish independence as a platform for social reforms within the framework of capitalism. On this basis the party postured as a left alternative to both Labour and the SNP. In the 2003 Scottish elections the SSP won six members of the Scottish parliament. Sheridan, as party leader, won media prominence as a reliable purveyor of left-sounding nationalist sound bites.

However, the SSP blew apart from 2004 and 2006, in an unprincipled faction fight pitching Sheridan’s formerly closest allies, led by Alan McCoombes, who colluded with the police and Rupert Murdoch’s now-defunct *News of the World*, including providing testimony that would lead to Sheridan serving time for perjury between December 2010 and January 2012.

The SPS and SWP both followed Sheridan in setting up Solidarity Scotland. The SSP and Solidarity continued to compete with each other in presenting the SNP and Scottish independence in the most progressive terms possible.

We noted as early as April 2007 that Sheridan had asked voters for the regional list in the Scottish parliamentary elections to support the SNP, a clear indication that Sheridan’s preferred career path led into the nationalist party. We also noted how, “Despite providing the bulk of Solidarity’s membership and resources ... neither the SWP nor the

SP have said anything to oppose Sheridan's nationalist pronouncements." In 2008, during the Glasgow East by-election, Sheridan stated baldly, "If I am being absolutely honest, I hope the SNP would win rather than Labour."

Commenting on the win by the SNP in Glasgow East, Sheridan proclaimed, "Let us be clear it is a victory for a left of centre party which carries on Glasgow's radical tradition...."

In 2011, speaking from his prison cell, Sheridan said on the elections to the Scottish parliament, "An SNP outright majority would be the best outcome. Such a determined stand led by an SNP government could force the Con-Dems onto the back foot and unite Scotland."

During the Scottish referendum campaign, Sheridan led the pro-nationalist intervention of the SPS and SWP, alongside similar efforts by the Radical Independence Convention and the SSP. The "Hope Over Fear" tour featured Sheridan's bullhorn nationalist demagoguery and stages draped with Scottish flags. It drew large working class audiences, who were corralled by Sheridan and his supporters behind the SNP and Scottish nationalism.

At the time the SPS and SWP uncritically hailed "Tommy" as the authentic voice of socialism. Now, the SPS admits of Sheridan's role during "Hope Over Fear", "Tommy did not, in the main, raise warnings about the SNP...Nor did he explain the need for a new working class party to be built as a challenge to the pro-capitalist ideas of the SNP leadership."

They continue, "Tommy was widely seen as a working class fighter with a record of struggle and different from the SNP leaders. His leading role in the campaign saw him reemerge as a figure with mass support."

The SPS and SWP are entirely responsible for Sheridan enjoying "mass support" and equally responsible for his ability to utilise the support he has on behalf of the SNP.

Public differences with Sheridan only emerged in the aftermath of the referendum vote. The SPS and the rest of the ex-left hoped to create a new electoral formation, organisationally independent of the SNP, which would continue to serve as the left face of Scottish nationalism. It would restrict workers seeking an alternative to the Labour Party to the SNP's pro-capitalist perspective of Scottish separatism, while elevating the leaders of the various pseudo-left groups to political prominence, from which they could secure lucrative positions in Holyrood, Glasgow and other local authorities as well as academia and the arts.

The immediate goal was to secure an electoral pact with the SNP on the basis of a "Yes Alliance."

Sheridan was having none of this. Alex Salmond and the SNP leadership had no need any longer for the services of the pseudo-left. Their support during the election and portrayal of the SNP as an oppositional force had led to a wave of recruits said to number 100,000. The SNP determined to utilise this in order to secure concessions from Westminster for the Scottish bourgeoisie—most probably through a de facto alliance with Labour. Too close ties to the pseudo-left were now considered inopportune.

Sheridan too knew which way the wind was blowing. Shortly after the referendum vote he wrote: "in order to maximise the pro-Independence vote in next May's General Election, all Yes supporters should vote for the SNP..."

Even this was only an occasion for the SPS and SWP to issue a polite reprimand of Sheridan for his "mistake".

The SWP wrote on September 23, "Tommy Sheridan played an

astonishing role in the campaign, speaking to over 25,000 people at meetings and inspiring many more. He ought to play a leading role in building the left, not giving cover to the SNP... The conference called by Solidarity—which is co-convened by Tommy Sheridan and which the SWP supports—on 25 October will be an important opportunity for debate."

The "debate" continued until last month, when Sheridan not only made clear that he was intent on calling for an SNP vote, but would do so even against candidates from the SPS and SWP standing as part of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC)—an electoral front backed by sections of the trade union bureaucracy.

Speaking at the Solidarity conference Sheridan insisted, "all my life I have called for a mass party of the working class. The SNP have become a mass party of the working class. They may be led by a middle class leadership, some of whom are certainly not socialists but are free marketeers in their very fibres. But the truth is that that party is almost 100,000 in Scotland and working class people are orientating towards it."

It can only be assumed that Sheridan hopes to find his own way into the "mass party of the working class" he has declared the SNP to be. But even at this point, the pseudo-left are keen to maintain relations with Sheridan and to the more overtly nationalist layers for whom he speaks. In their statement announcing a split with Solidarity, the SPS continue to refer to Sheridan as "Tommy" and describe him as "the most prominent socialist in Scotland." For their part, the SWP has remained silent and made no indication of breaking with Sheridan, who told the *Herald*, "We had a comradely debate, we remain comrades."

The entire experience vindicates the principled stand taken by the Socialist Equality Party in opposition to the promotion of Scottish nationalism by the pseudo-left.

The SEP statement, *Vote No in Scottish Referendum, Fight for a Socialist Britain*, noted, "The fake left groups act as foot soldiers for the 'yes' campaign by lying about its motives, aims and impact. Their specific role is to attempt to break down the significant opposition that exists to the separatist project among Scottish workers."

It concluded, "In opposition to all forms of nationalism, the SEP calls on workers and youth to renew the great traditions of class solidarity of the British working class on new and higher foundations—in a unified movement for the abolition of capitalism, in Britain, Europe and internationally."

The SEP's candidates, Katie Rhodes in Glasgow Central and David O'Sullivan in Holborn & St. Pancras, are the sole socialist voice in the May 7 general election.

For further details visit: www.socialequality.org.uk



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