

Scottish National Party leader Nicola Sturgeon denies claim she wants a Conservative government

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Scottish National Party (SNP) leader Nicola Sturgeon has denied a report that she would prefer Conservative Party leader David Cameron as prime minister after the May 7 General Election to Labour leader Ed Miliband.

The allegation was made by the *Daily Telegraph*, which claimed to have seen a leaked official British government memo detailing a private meeting between Sturgeon and Sylvie Bermann, French Ambassador to the UK.

According to the newspaper, Sturgeon, who is first minister in Scotland's devolved parliament, told Bermann that Miliband was not "prime minister material."

Sturgeon said the claim was "categorically, one hundred percent untrue." Bermann's spokesman denied the report, as did the French consul general in Edinburgh, Pierre-Alain Coffinier.

The official who drafted the memo also appeared sceptical about the claim. Reporting on the "truncated meeting" between Sturgeon and Bermann, the memo records that the first minister had "confessed that she'd rather see David Cameron remain as PM (and didn't see Ed Miliband as PM material). I have to admit that I'm not sure that the FM's [Scottish First Minister's] tongue would be quite so loose on that kind of thing in a meeting like that, so it might well be a case of something being lost in translation."

The leak came less than 24 hours after the first televised debate in the general election campaign between seven party leaders. Cameron and Miliband were joined by Sturgeon, Nick Clegg of the Liberal Democrats, Nigel Farage of the anti-European and xenophobic UK Independence Party (UKIP), Leanne Wood for the Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru and Natalie Bennett for the Green Party.

The participation of such numbers in an official televised debate is a first. It is a sign of the disintegration of the political set-up in Britain, under the weight of sharpening class tensions and divisions within the bourgeoisie itself.

According to opinion polls, Sturgeon won a sympathetic hearing from the seven million plus TV audience, with one

poll placing her overall winner. One of the most searched for terms on the Internet was, "Can I vote for the SNP in England?"

Sturgeon's appeal underscores the continued collapse of the Labour Party, which is widely reviled as no different than the Tories. It is committed to major spending cuts, differing only as to the speed with which they should be implemented. Miliband's efforts to try and present Labour as more in tune with working people, pledging to curtail zero-hour contracts and raise the minimum wage, have little traction.

In the TV broadcast, the nationalist parties successfully pointed to Labour's role in the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales, where it is imposing spending cuts—some £28.9 million in Glasgow alone—and blocked measures in Wales to ban zero-hour contracts for social care workers. It was noticeable too that Miliband avoided any conflict with Farage, as Labour is keen to stress its own anti-immigrant credentials.

Writing in the *Telegraph*, former Labour Party and GMB union official Dan Hodges complained, "Ed Miliband's left flank has suddenly—and dangerously—been exposed" by the debate.

Labour is polling poorly across the UK and is forecast to be wiped out in Scotland, with the SNP the beneficiary. This increases the likelihood of a hung parliament, in which the Scottish nationalists would play the role of kingmaker in a new government at Westminster.

The SNP has ruled out a coalition with the Conservatives, but has said it would support a minority Labour administration on a case-by-case basis.

In response, the Tories are making a barely concealed appeal to English nationalism to prop up their vote, trying to outflank UKIP on the right. The *Telegraph* is at the forefront of this offensive, with one columnist declaring Sturgeon to be the "most dangerous woman in Britain."

Writing in the newspaper, Conservative London Mayor

Boris Johnson claimed that a Labour government would be the dog “wagged by a Scottish SNP tail.”

“The SNP positively drool about the swingeing new taxes they could impose on the English, especially in London and the South East,” he wrote, forecasting five years of “socialism” in the event of an SNP-backed Labour administration.

For her part, Sturgeon made great play of her party’s “leftist” credentials during the TV debate to reassure working people in England that a vote for the SNP in Scotland would be to their advantage. It would ensure that a Labour government would be held to account, she suggested, with a “strong team of SNP MPs” voting “not only to end austerity—but to restore England’s NHS [National Health Service].”

There is no truth in the claims made by either Johnson or Sturgeon.

For all the SNP’s criticisms of Labour, Sturgeon took to the pages of *The Observer* on Sunday to offer to make Miliband prime minister. She farcically described this as a potential “anti-austerity” pact, just shortly after attacking Labour for voting only weeks ago with the Tories to push through a further £30 billion in spending cuts.

For all Johnson’s hyperbole, the SNP has no fundamental differences over austerity. Like Labour, its dispute with the Tories is only over a time frame. It proposes a “modest” increase in public spending—just 0.5 percent each year—supposedly targeted at economic revival.

The SNP’s manifesto is so modest that there is barely anything there. It states it will support an increase in the minimum wage to £8.70 an hour by 2020. That is just 20 pence more than is pledged by Labour over the same period, during which the minimum wage could be expected to rise in line with inflation automatically to £7.50.

Even this paltry increase is, like Labour’s pledge, dependent on “favourable” economic conditions. Outside of this, the SNP has promised only to try and sign 500 companies up to pay a “living wage” to their employees, limited means-tested help for the poorest students, and a £20 million fund over the next three years to “tackle violence against women.”

The SNP’s support for Labour comes despite Miliband making clear that any government he leads would never agree to scrap the Trident nuclear submarine project. This demand is the SNP’s sole remaining attempt at an anti-war pose, having officially abandoned its opposition to NATO.

Sturgeon has said that Trident is a “red line” in “terms of any formal arrangement with Labour”. But given that such a formal arrangement is not on the table, such guarantees come cheap.

She has said that SNP backing for Miliband would not be

dependent on his agreement to a further referendum on Scottish independence. Just as significantly, Sturgeon refused to confirm that the SNP would insist on Labour including plans for full fiscal autonomy for Scotland in the home rule bill Miliband has pledged to introduce within 100 days of taking office. She said only that the SNP would argue for “maximum powers” in the new parliament.

Following September’s referendum, the SNP pledged to go for “Devomax”—full fiscal autonomy. This would mean ending the Barnett formula, under which funding is centrally allocated throughout the UK, making Scotland dependent on the revenues it raises locally.

This was before the collapse in oil prices on which the SNP had made the case for Scotland’s separation from England. They have fallen from \$110 a barrel at the time of September’s referendum to \$60.

Some 370,000 workers are employed in the North Sea oil and energy sector, but an estimated 10,000 offshore jobs have already gone since the oil price fall.

The Anglo-Dutch oil group Shell has confirmed it is cutting 10 percent of its 2,400 workforce in the North Sea, on top of the 250 already implemented last August. It is increasing employees’ working hours from the current pattern of two weeks on, two weeks off, to three weeks on, three weeks off. Expro is cutting 60 jobs, mainly in Aberdeen. The Abu Dhabi National Energy Company TAQA UK is cutting 100 jobs, and Talisman Sinopec 300.

North Sea oil workers in the Unite and GMB trade unions are balloting on industrial action, which could result in their first strike since 1979.



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