

Scottish National Party's overtures to Labour prompt Conservative backlash

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The Scottish National Party (SNP) has released its manifesto for the General Election on May 7.

Short on details, it is framed entirely from the standpoint of positioning the SNP as a potential coalition partner with a minority Labour government.

The manifesto's release comes as opinion polls predict a wipe-out for Labour in its traditional strongholds in Scotland. Widely derided as "Red Tories" for their right-wing big business policies, Labour looks set to replicate the fate of the Conservative Party that has just one MP in Scotland out of 59. With some forecasting Labour could be reduced from its current 41 MPs to a mere handful, the result could leave the SNP as "kingmaker" in the likely outcome of a hung parliament.

The SNP has made great play of its stated opposition to austerity, condemning Labour for joining the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in committing to a further £30 billion in spending cuts. But such attacks are belied by its stated aim of putting Labour in power at Westminster.

Publicly Labour and the SNP have ruled out a formal coalition, but both have left open the possibility of a "confidence and supply" alliance. SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon has repeatedly stressed that a strong showing for her party would be used to make Labour leader Ed Miliband the next prime minister.

The SNP manifesto underscores this commitment, largely replicating Labour's own with its pledges to a hike in the minimum wage, "modest" spending increases, a "mansion" tax, and so on. The SNP would "make a Labour government bolder and better" rather than just a "carbon copy of the Tories", Sturgeon said.

Such promises, whether coming from the SNP or Labour, are worthless, given that they are predicated on a non-existent growth in the world economy and

agreement on reducing Britain's national deficit each year. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies pointed out, all the party's plans "imply further austerity over the next parliament," noting a "considerable disconnect" between the SNP's policies and their "anti-austerity rhetoric."

In fact, the SNP has cut the total value of its pledge to raise spending by 0.5 percent three times in three months—from £180 billion, to £165 billion and now £140 billion in the manifesto. Even so, the spending promise appears alongside its pledge "to enshrine in law key principles of financial management ... to ensure prudent levels of debt are achieved."

This is all part of the SNP's pitch to establish itself as a responsible party of government. "The SNP is not going to Westminster to seek to block budgets and bring down governments," Sturgeon said, but to "bring positive change."

While the SNP will "Speak up for Scotland", she added, it would use its "position of influence ... in the interests of people not just in Scotland but across the whole of the UK. To everyone who, like me, wants this election to herald the real and positive change that will make life better for ordinary people across these islands, I hold out a hand of friendship."

Sturgeon indicated that her party's opposition to the renewal of Britain's Trident nuclear submarine programme would not be a barrier to an alliance with Labour. There is no reason why it should be, as the SNP has overturned its former opposition to membership of NATO—the largest nuclear bloc in the world—and supported the NATO intervention into Libya.

The SNP also blocs with Labour in opposing Britain's withdrawal from the European Union (EU). Against Prime Minister David Cameron's pledge to

hold an in/out referendum on British membership by 2017 should he win re-election, Miliband has said there will be no such ballot under a Labour government.

With a view to a potential referendum on the issue, however, the SNP pledges that it would seek to “ensure that no constituent part of the UK can be taken out of the EU against its will. We will propose a ‘double majority’ rule—meaning that unless England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland each vote to leave the EU, the UK would remain a member state.”

This threat is balanced by the manifesto’s omission of any reference to a further referendum on Scottish independence—something that is openly demanded by many SNP members and by the pseudo-left groups in particular. The “SNP will always support independence—but that is not what this election is about,” the manifesto states, while the call for Scotland to gain full fiscal autonomy is relegated to the penultimate page, along with the acknowledgement that this “would take a number of years.”

The watering down of the SNP’s previous demands has not stopped Cameron from presenting the possibility of a Labour-SNP coalition as a “calamitous outcome” for the UK.

He has been joined by former Conservative Prime Minister John Major, who this week said that “the SNP is a clear and present danger to our future. They will pit Scotland against England. That could be disastrous to the people of Scotland—and fatal to the UK as a whole.”

Such warnings conceal the fact that the Conservative Party is attempting to whip up English nationalism in a desperate bid to retain power. With Labour and the Tories polling neck and neck, Cameron’s fortunes are dependent on convincing supporters of the anti-EU UK Independence Party (UKIP) to return to the Tory fold.

On Thursday, Cameron launched a Conservative “mini-manifesto” for England. In keeping with Tory plans to introduce “English votes on English laws” after the election, it proposes that England be able to set its own level of income tax. Only English MPs in Westminster would be allowed to vote, it proposes, along with matters pertaining to health and housing in England.

The prime minister claimed that this was necessary to redress the fact that, under plans for greater devolution being considered by the Smith Commission, the Scottish parliament would soon have powers to set

income tax levels in Scotland.

Cameron’s appeal to English nationalism has led to criticism from within the Tory party, with Conservative peer Lord Forsyth condemning it as “short-term and dangerous” and a threat to “the integrity of the country”.

The deliberate inflaming of nationalist tensions is indicative of the deep-going crisis within the British bourgeoisie. Under the impact of a mounting social and economic crisis, the traditional mechanisms of rule are collapsing.

Just how advanced this is, is made clear by the comments of former Tory chairman, Lord Tebbit. Cameron’s electoral pitch “is perhaps not altogether wise ... we are compounding the problem. The Scottish Nats [SNP] are writ large UKIP—they come from the same creation, the irritation with the Westminster establishment,” he said.

Reinforcing the “Red Tory” charge against Miliband, the arch-Thatcherite said Conservative voters should consider voting Labour in Scotland.

“From the Tories’ point of view we are not going to come home with a vast number of seats from Scotland. ... So the choice is would we rather have a Scot Nat or Labour? I think, on balance, probably a Labour MP would be a more reasonable thing to have,” he said.

He went even further, suggesting that the Conservative Party should fold up in Scotland and help create a pro-UK party:

“What is needed in Scotland from the Tories’ point of view is to wrap up the Conservative party and put down a little bit of fertiliser on the ground to encourage the growth of a Scottish unionist party.”



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