

Contradiction between pro-business policies and leftist rhetoric defines Scottish National Party conference

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The Scottish National Party (SNP) annual conference, held in Aberdeen last week, should have been a triumphal affair. After all, in last May's UK general election, the party had a landslide victory, winning all but three of the 59 Scottish parliamentary seats to Westminster.

The Labour Party suffered a catastrophic loss of all but one of its previous 41 seats in Scotland. The Liberal Democrats and Conservatives barely managed to scrape together a seat each.

As the conference approached, there was growing anticipation, especially among party activists, that the party leadership would use the occasion to demand a second referendum on independence from Britain should they win, as expected, an unprecedented third term in office following next May's Scottish Assembly elections.

Instead, cracks began to appear in the SNP monolith.

There were scant references to independence, and a second referendum was ruled out in the speech of party leader and Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, who declared, "We believe that Scotland should be independent—we always have and we always will...[but] the time to propose another referendum will be when there is clear evidence that opinion has changed and that independence has become the choice of a majority of people in Scotland."

"We must build the case and make it stronger. Convince those we didn't convince last year," Sturgeon concluded.

SNP deputy leader John Swinney added that in the May 2016 elections, the SNP would appeal to "yes" and "no" voters because "the SNP are the national party of all Scotland."

The cautious approach of the party leadership points to two things.

Firstly, it is clear they do not believe the claims that the 55 percent "no" to independence vote in last year's referendum can now be easily reversed. Significant opposition to separation still exists.

Secondly, they know that the growth in support for the SNP has largely been due to its perceived opposition to the austerity policies of successive British governments and not national sentiment.

Much of the hard graft in that respect was done by the pseudo-lefts in the Scottish Socialist Party, Solidarity Scotland and Radical Independence Campaign, who provided the main foot soldiers for the SNP for years. Throughout the referendum, they promoted the SNP as a left alternative to Labour, and even hailed it as a "new mass workers' party" and a steppingstone towards a socialist republic. There is no guarantee they will be able to do it again.

Sturgeon et al. are aware of the precarious nature of the support for the SNP, and thus the conference was directed towards attempts at maintaining its already damaged anti-austerity image.

She insisted that voters in the Scottish Assembly election should judge the SNP on its record, declaring, "The other parties say they want to fight the election on our record."

"Well, I say, 'good'—because so do I. Our record in government is one of delivery and achievement."

However, she was obliged to add, "It's not perfect—of course it's not—the recession and Westminster austerity have created a financial climate much tougher than anything we could have contemplated back in 2007."

"But, make no mistake, it is a record I am proud of."

And you should be proud of it too.”

For all the rhetoric, Sturgeon only came up with a few minor policy proposals, including an extra teacher in nursery schools in deprived areas, more flexible child care provision, a handful of new health treatment centres and increased carers’ allowance.

An article in the latest edition of the *Economist* magazine, “The Scottish National Party’s triumphant hesitancy,” accompanied by a picture of Holyrood surrounded by riot police, describes how “the spotlight falls once more on its mixed record of improving Scots’ daily lives and in which more questions are asked about the gap between the party’s left-wing rhetoric and its small-c conservatism in power.”

The article notes that the local authorities’ representative body, COSLA, calls Scotland “the most centralised country in Europe,” with ministers assuming control of local council services, increasing police powers and planning a national identification register. It describes how “the SNP has concentrated cuts on local, frontline services (Scottish councils are twice as indebted per head as English and Welsh ones, despite the country’s disproportionately generous funding).”

The SNP’s exposed position accounts for the undisguised hostility directed at new Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn. In the run-up to the SNP conference, Corbyn stressed that he opposed a second independence referendum and hoped Labour “can offer a sufficiently radical economic agenda for the whole of the UK.”

“There is the class politics issue of it”, he said. “That is the message I am taking to Scotland—flags don’t build houses.”

Sturgeon responded with a broadside directed at Corbyn just as much as Conservative prime minister David Cameron.

The SNP was a “credible” left-wing, social democratic party, unlike Labour—a “credible” one, in contrast with Labour, which Sturgeon claimed was going “deeper and deeper into the political wilderness” under Corbyn.

“Their disunity threatens to consign the UK to another decade of Tory government,” she said.

The SNP was opposed to renewing the Trident nuclear weapons system and would vote against military intervention in Syria—issues on which Corbyn

has capitulated to his party’s right wing.

His “incoherent position” on these questions was proof that “so far, Jeremy Corbyn isn’t changing Labour—he’s allowing Labour to change him.”

Sturgeon is just as able to critique Corbyn as he is the SNP. Both are pro-business parties dressed in flimsy anti-austerity attire. Nevertheless, the SNP’s progressive mask, disguising neo-liberal policies aimed at bolstering Scottish capitalism, developing the country as a location for investment and financial speculation and as a tax haven for the world’s super rich, is slipping.

The acrimony she expressed towards Corbyn is an indication of an underlying concern that, after years in which the SNP could rely on Labour’s right-wing agenda to lend credibility to the independence project, there are clear indications that workers on both sides of the border are looking for a genuine political alternative.



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