

Jeremy Corbyn supports autonomy for Scottish Labour Party

Steve James

20 November 2015

Only a few weeks ago, the Labour Party's new leader Jeremy Corbyn expressed the view that working people in Scotland and England had common interests. "If you're poor in Glasgow and you're poor in Birmingham, then you are poor. If you need a house in Glasgow and you need a house in London, then you need a house," he said in criticising the Scottish National Party (SNP).

Little of this sentiment survived Corbyn's visit to last month's Scottish Labour conference in Perth. Instead, he used the conference as a platform to promote a variant of the left-sounding Scottish nationalism in which Labour's main rival in Scotland, the SNP, specialise.

Labour opposes Scottish independence, but has, for decades, promoted regional chauvinism to foster divisions in the working class. It was the Labour government under Tony Blair that introduced the devolved Scottish parliament in Holyrood, Edinburgh. Blair and his allies viewed devolution as a means to contain the SNP, while promoting regional competition to drive down wages and smash up welfare.

By handing over restricted powers to a Scottish parliament that had last sat in 1707, the Labour Party sought to assist the regional companies and investment agencies whose interests were bound up with directly attracting investment capital without going through the cumbersome Westminster apparatus.

Labour believed that its devolutionary measures would, at the same time, preserve a unified British state because the Scottish parliamentary set-up had supposedly been designed so that no party could establish overall control.

The collapse of the official bourgeois parties proved that calculation wrong. With Labour seen as little more than another Conservative Party, the SNP's

oppositional posturing has seen it win a majority in Holyrood. Although it lost the September 2014 referendum on Scottish independence by a wide margin, the SNP has been able to capitalise on hostility to the official "Westminster" parties, winning a massive majority in the 2015 general election—mostly at the expense of the Labour Party that lost all but one of its 41 seats.

With elections due in Scotland next year, Labour faces a complete wipeout in Holyrood and is in danger of losing what is left of its grip on local government. Only Glasgow and North Lanarkshire councils remain Labour-controlled, but both areas logged pro-independence majorities during the referendum.

Corbyn's election as Labour leader was, in part, aimed at trying to reverse this catastrophe for the party in its former stronghold. By ditching Labour's association with Blair, the Iraq war and support for austerity, the party was to regain support.

The leadership result has drawn in some members to the party in Scotland, attracted by Corbyn's reformist rhetoric. But despite doubling, Labour's Scottish membership is still only around one-third that of the SNP.

Kezia Dugdale, the new leader of the Scottish Labour Party (SLP), opposed Corbyn's election. A supporter of Yvette Cooper, Dugdale had been positioning Scottish Labour to re-establish its credentials on a right-wing ticket.

Dugdale and Corbyn now appear to have reached some accommodation, no doubt centred on backing the Scottish leader's demands for greater autonomy for the SLP. She argues that Labour's mistake was to participate only "half-heartedly" in the "practical" application of devolution and has called for greater regional autonomy. In line with this, a joint pre-

conference statement issued by Corbyn and Dugdale announced an agreement to “make the Scottish Labour Party more autonomous.”

During the referendum campaign, Labour was much criticised for its alliance with the Conservatives in the official “Better Together” campaign for a “No” vote. The SNP was able to point to Labour’s alliance with the Cameron government as proof of its right-wing character. Responding to this, Dugdale and Corbyn signalled that, in future, Scottish Labour could go its own way, although “there will be co-operation between Scottish Labour and UK Labour on reserved policy areas”. Reserved policy areas are those still decided at Westminster rather than in the devolved administrations in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast.

Corbyn’s speech at the Scottish Labour conference took this further, noting that “When the Scotland Bill goes through the House of Commons, the UK will become one of the most devolved nations in the world.” He insisted, “That is why it is right that decisions about Scottish Labour will be taken by the members and activists of the Scottish Labour Party. ... the management of your affairs and the selection of your candidates will be undertaken here in Scotland.” Prior to the conference, Dugdale had gone so far as suggesting that Labour MPs and MSPs should be free to campaign for Scottish independence in a future referendum.

Positions taken at the conference should be seen in this context. Dugdale announced that, if elected in Holyrood, Labour would reinstate cuts in working tax credits recently introduced by the Cameron government in Westminster. No explanation was offered by either Dugdale or Corbyn of why working families in England and Wales should be less deserving of the credits than their peers in Scotland.

Equally deceptive was the conference vote, by a 70 percent majority, to oppose the renewal of the Trident nuclear missile system, whose four submarines are based at the Faslane base on the Gareloch, part of the Clyde estuary. Trident, and its predecessor Polaris, has been based at Faslane since its introduction during the Cold War. The base, also home to the Royal Navy’s fleet of nuclear attack submarines, has been the target of hundreds of protests over the decades of its existence.

The Labour Party, including its Scottish wing, has

upheld the British nuclear arsenal from its inception. By suddenly opposing Trident, Scottish Labour is again seeking to don some of the SNP’s clothes. Like the SNP, Scottish Labour’s new veneer of opposition to the weapons system commits the party, both in Scotland and across the UK, to absolutely nothing.

Both the SNP and Scottish Labour support NATO and European Union membership. The SNP’s position is for Trident to be replaced with more conventional fast jets and warships, to allow greater participation in international military operations. Scottish Labour, no less than the party across Britain, is fully implicated in every bloodbath organised by the Blair and Gordon Brown governments in Westminster.

Expressing the new closer relations between the two parties, the Scottish parliament voted by a large majority in favour of a motion calling for the British government to abandon plans for a Trident replacement. The motion was proposed by the SNP and amended by Labour.

Trident renewal is, however, an issue reserved for Westminster. The vote, therefore, served both parties’ purposes. For the SNP, the vote deepened the apparent differences between Westminster and Holyrood. The SNP is seeking to establish a number of triggers for a new referendum on independence and renewal of Trident has been mooted by SNP Westminster leader Angus Robertson as one of them.

For Corbyn, the vote somewhat bolstered the beleaguered new leader’s position in his continual tactical manoeuvres and adaptations to the most openly right-wing and war-mongering elements of the party. That this could only be done by conceding partial autonomy to a party which was, until recently, one of the most reliable sources of Labour MPs, is a marker of the advanced state of Labour’s collapse and disintegration.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact