

Brexit vote sparks crisis for Scottish National Party

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Last October, Nicola Sturgeon, Scottish First Minister and leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), told the party's conference that a UK vote to leave the European Union (EU) without a majority in Scotland it would create "probably unstoppable" momentum for a second Scottish independence referendum.

For months, Sturgeon's public remarks mined a similar theme—the difficulties of Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron were Scotland's opportunity.

Yet now that Cameron has taken the decision to hold a referendum on British membership of the EU, Sturgeon has become far more circumspect. Asked on the likelihood of a second Scottish referendum following a "Brexit" vote, Sturgeon told the BBC's Andrew Marr, "I think that would be the demand of people in Scotland." But she took pains to add, "Let me say very clearly that I don't want this scenario to arise."

Sturgeon has subsequently proclaimed her intention to campaign for the whole of the UK to remain in the EU. What accounts for the shift in emphasis?

Certainly, there has been some horse trading. Three days after Cameron's announcement of a referendum date, protracted negotiations, ongoing for nearly a year, for a new financial package for the Scottish government were hastily concluded. The deal agreed a mechanism to alter the grant allocated to the Scottish government by Westminster in line with new tax raising and welfare powers being devolved to Holyrood in the Scotland Bill currently going through the House of Lords. Satisfied responses from both London and Edinburgh suggests that the deal suits both parties, who now sing from the same pro EU hymn sheet.

More is at stake than this, however, a hint of which was given by former SNP leader and party grandee Gordon Wilson who led the SNP between 1979 and 1990. Wilson warned shortly after Cameron's referendum announcement that the EU "is no friend of Scottish

independence because of potential secessionist perils in Belgium, Spain and Northern Italy."

He continued, "The SNP Government should proceed with extreme caution before seeking another referendum based on Scotland acceding to the EU."

Wilson's comments cut across the generally pro-EU line of the SNP leadership.

The party has for decades promoted the slogan of "independence in Europe" as a means of ensuring a flow of global investment to counteract the vast economic disruption that would follow secession from the UK. But this perspective was greatly undermined during the 2014 referendum campaign, when leading EU figures such as then European Commission President José Manuel Barroso repeatedly refused to endorse a transition for a newly independent Scotland into the EU.

Concerned over the impact of encouraging separatist movements such as in Catalonia, Spain, Barroso made clear that the last thing Berlin, Paris and other capitals wanted was some of the key EU member states being threatened with disintegration with Scotland, population 5 million, having set the process rolling.

The absurdity is striking. The SNP, and their legions of pseudo-left admirers, propose to leave the UK because, they claim, it is insufficiently responsive to the demands of the "Scottish people" and is dominated by London.

The pseudo-left even make the preposterous claim that an independent Scotland offers a platform for socialism and would represent a blow to imperialism. In pursuit of this, however, they propose to replace the "bad" UK with the "good" EU—an imperialist power bloc that is a key instrument for imposing austerity in Greece, Spain, Portugal, Ireland and across the continent and an ally of the US-led NATO alliance. Then, when their perspective of leaving the UK is rejected by the EU itself, they take up the call for the UK, from which they want to break, to remain in the EU.

Sturgeon has come forward as the most craven booster of the political bona-fides of the EU. She recently wrote in the *Guardian*, “Being part of the EU is also about solidarity, social protection and mutual support.” Even as tens of thousands of people camp in the open winter air around the militarised and impenetrable borders of Fortress Europe, Sturgeon continued, “By working together within the EU, we can achieve far more and make a real difference to some of the world’s most vulnerable people.”

The Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) rushed to endorse the SNP’s stance. Writing in the *Scottish Socialist Voice*, Hugh Cullen hailed the “democratisation for the EU that is currently being fought for by our comrades in other European Left movements,” which included Die Linke in Germany, Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. Cullen continued excitedly, “Our struggle [for independence and socialism!] is not impeded by the EU (at this time).”

Underlying the gyrations of the SNP and its pseudo-left hangers-on is the hopelessly outmoded character of their perspective for the creation of an “independent” capitalist Scotland. In the 21st century, with tiny Scotland so utterly dependent on, and part of, the integrated British, European and world economy, the perspective of “independence” articulates nothing other than the desire of Scottish-based capitalist interests to secure a greater share of the exploitation of the working class by driving down wages, welfare costs and cutting taxes to create an investment platform for entry into the European market.

But over the last period, sections of business which, in conditions of boom prior to the crash of 2008, supported independence favour instead some form of negotiated settlement with the rest of the UK to allow them to set lower corporation taxes, etc.

The collapsing price of oil has destroyed much of the nationalists’ fiscal case. Where once SNP and pseudo-left economists calculated spending plans based on prices above \$100 per barrel, high enough to sustain North Sea oil extraction for decades, Brent crude is currently selling at \$33.91. North Sea oil production is collapsing and tens of thousands of jobs are threatened. The SNP and the large Aberdeen-based oil industry and trade unions have been reduced to begging London for tax breaks pending a price increase.

Equally damaging is the much-reduced weight of the Scottish-based financial sector. Edinburgh and Glasgow remain significant centres of global banking and parasitism, but the leading players of the once powerful sector have not recovered from the crash of 2008. RBS,

briefly one of the world’s largest banks, with a market capitalisation close to the value of the entire Scottish GDP, became one of the most indebted.

The bank has now lost money every one of the last eight years. Total losses amount to £51 billion, £45 billion of which has been provided by British taxpayers. Close to 100,000 jobs have been lost. RBS remains 73 percent owned by the British government. RBS chair Sir Howard Davies considers a Brexit as “unwelcome” and the issue of Scottish independence “parked”. Another former Scottish champion, HBOS, lost at least £25 billion with another £10 billion contested in an ongoing court action querying the circumstances of its forced takeover by Lloyds in 2008. Both banks are deeply entrenched in the City of London.

In addition, some 60 percent of Scottish trade is with the UK and most of the rest is with the EU. Disruption of either due to a Brexit or Scottish independence would quickly pitch Scotland and all of the UK deeper into economic crisis.

For the working class no way out of this dangerous morass exists within the confines of Britain, let alone tiny Scotland. This is why the Socialist Equality Party called for a No vote in the 2014 referendum in order to oppose the nationalist division of the working class and opposed all attempt to dress this up as some means of opposing British imperialism. It highlights the significance of the SEP’s call for an active boycott of the Brexit referendum, which rejects both the European Union as an instrument of the European banks and great powers, and the attempt to channel opposition to the EU behind a nationalist agenda for British sovereignty.

Rather, we insist that the great historically progressive task of uniting Europe can only be undertaken through the active mobilisation of the continent’s working class in a struggle against poverty, militarism and war and for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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