

Scottish National Party pushes for second independence referendum

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25 October 2016

Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon met British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday to discuss the crisis prompted by the June referendum vote for the UK to leave the European Union (EU). The leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) was joined in the talks by the leaders of the two other devolved administrations, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Scotland voted by 62 to 38 percent to remain in the EU, against 52 to 48 percent to leave across the UK. Northern Ireland also voted to remain by 55 to 45 percent.

Writing in the *Financial Times*, Sturgeon noted, “I accept that there is a mandate to take England and Wales out of the EU, I do not accept there is any such mandate to take any part of the UK out of the [EU] single market.”

The talks follow the announcement last week by the SNP administration of a draft bill for a second referendum on Scottish independence. No date or timetable was set, and the bill does not commit the Scottish government to holding a new poll. Publication nevertheless adds to the crisis of a British and European nation-state system already reeling from the implications of the June 23 vote for Britain to leave the European Union (EU).

Sturgeon explained that the vote outcome, with the Scottish result at odds with the UK-wide result, was “one of the specific scenarios” in which the Scottish government had previously proposed to hold a rerun of the 2014 referendum on independence. Speaking in Glasgow a few days previously, Sturgeon proclaimed she was “determined that Scotland will have the ability to reconsider the question of independence—and to do so before the UK leaves the EU—if that is necessary to protect our country’s interests.”

The qualifiers scattered around Sturgeon’s pronouncement reflect both the uncertainties around the Brexit process, and the perplexity within the SNP over how to respond. Following the financial crisis of 2008, the subsequent slump in oil prices and the collapse of North

Sea oil production, the prospect of Scottish independence, and the enormous instability that comes with it, is distinctly unappealing to business and financial circles.

Moreover, without prior agreement with the EU, an independent Scotland would be excluded from the Single Market or face sanctions regarding intra-UK trade on which it overwhelmingly depends. Any agreement with the EU is highly unlikely as it would be seized by regionalist and secessionist movements across the continent. This applies particularly in Spain, where the months-long government crisis has been intensified and complicated by the Catalan nationalist drive for independence, and in Belgium where the Wallonian regional parliament are currently delaying a multibillion-euro trade deal, five years in the making, between the EU and Canada.

This is why, during the campaign for the June 23 vote the SNP campaigned for the UK as a whole to “Remain” in the EU, despite having campaigned to leave the UK two years previously. Sturgeon was amongst the most prominent pro EU speakers. Sturgeon offered to participate in a “progressive alliance” with Labour, although this was rejected by the bitterly divided Labour Party.

For Sturgeon and the SNP leadership, the draft referendum bill and the threat of a new poll is a tool with which to extract concessions from London—primarily over the terms of Brexit. Sturgeon has repeatedly demanded post-Brexit access to the Single Market for Scottish based business and the right to maintain a more lenient migration policy to alleviate a falling population.

Sturgeon called in the *Financial Times* for a “flexible” Brexit in which different parts of the UK, or different sectors of the British economy, would take advantage of continuing single market membership and close association with EU trading-partners.” Similar bespoke arrangements are being floated for Northern Ireland and

the City of London, with suggestions that billions could be paid into the EU annually to allow London to maintain its position as a leading European financial centre.

At the same time, the prospect of a new poll serves to mollify the SNP's many supporters who are committed to Scottish independence come what may. In the immediate aftermath of the 2014 vote, lost by 55 to 45 percent, SNP membership quadrupled to over 100,000 augmenting its long-standing hard line separatists with new forces largely won from the Labour Party. The Green Party has already begun to campaign for a new independence vote. Party leader Patrick Harvie claimed last week that "the UK which people voted for in 2014 no longer exists."

The issues around which the SNP are seeking to pressure London are precisely those on which May and her pro-Brexit cabinet are refusing to offer concessions. Over the last weeks, it has become clear that the Conservatives, despite their deep divisions, are led by elements set upon pursuing a so-called "hard Brexit" in which they are ready to sacrifice access to the single market in order to end free movement of EU labour and preserve the City of London from regulatory interference.

Successive statements from government ministers have attacked foreign workers for, in the words of Home Secretary Amber Rudd, taking "jobs that British people should do." Government proposals, later retracted, to require companies to publish the proportion of international staff they employ provoked widespread condemnation from business circles. In response, EU leaders have made clear that access to the Single Market is dependent on British agreement on the free movement of labour within the EU.

Relations between London and the EU are degenerating rapidly, with opinions in the EU's capitals consolidating around a view that Britain should be made to pay for the continent-wide mayhem that the Brexit vote has intensified. As former Polish prime minister, and current president of the Council of Europe, Donald Tusk put it, "The only real alternative to a hard Brexit," where no agreement is reached on market access or migration, "is no Brexit."

Seeking to overcome EU hostility, the SNP is, perforce, turning to an ever more fervent embrace of imperialist militarism to make its case for EU membership. In 2012, the party dropped its opposition to NATO and it has long been apparent that its opposition to Trident nuclear missiles was simply a rhetorical smokescreen. Scotland hosts the entire British nuclear submarine fleet at Faslane, 20 miles from Glasgow. The Faslane base, which employs

over 7,000 workers and service personnel, is undergoing an expansion and rebuilding to host the newly agreed Trident replacement without a word of complaint from the SNP.

British Defence Minister Harriet Baldwin recently confirmed that all eight of the Royal Navy's new Type 26 "Global Combat Ships" would be built in Glasgow. One of the surviving shipyards on the Clyde is in Govan, Nicola Sturgeon's constituency. Besides announcing the draft referendum bill, Sturgeon, an admirer of Hillary Clinton, used her conference speech to line up with US and British foreign policy against Russia. "The barbarism of the Assad regime and actions of Russia are sickening," intoned Sturgeon, while keeping silent on US and British responsibility for the disaster in the first place.

Where this is heading was outlined by Stephen Gethins, an SNP Westminster MP and member of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee. Gethins suggested Scotland could be the means whereby the US offset its loss of influence in the EU following Brexit: "The United States also has a strong interest in the European Union as President Obama outlined during the EU referendum. Scotland remaining part of the EU would provide a partner within Europe as well as bringing Scotland significant competitive and strategic benefits."

Gethins' proposals are another devastating exposure of the claims by Britain's pseudo-left groups regarding the alleged left-wing and anti-militarist character of the movement for Scottish independence. However, the US is no more likely than the EU to compromise relations with NATO members Spain and Belgium to give encouragement to the SNP.



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