Scottish National Party clashes with Johnson government over second independence referendum

Chris Marsden, Steve James
22 January 2020

The Scottish National Party (SNP) has seized on last December's general election result to push for a second referendum on Scottish independence. This puts the party on a collision course with Boris Johnson's Conservative government.

Last week, Johnson wrote to SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon rejecting her December 19 request for the transfer of powers to the Holyrood parliament necessary to hold a second referendum on independence (Indyref2)—under section 30 of the 1998 Scotland Act. Sturgeon also called for the Scottish parliament to be given permanent powers to hold subsequent referendums on independence.

"The Scottish people voted decisively to keep our United Kingdom together, a result which both the Scottish and UK Governments committed to respect," Johnson wrote, prompting Sturgeon to declare Johnson's position "self-defeating … The Westminster union cannot be sustained without consent. Democracy will prevail."

Sturgeon has promised a considered response for next month.

The invocations of democracy by both sides seek to conceal a row between rival bourgeois factions whose interests, aims and nationalist agendas are hostile to the working class on both sides of the border.

The SNP's main political advantage in seeking an independence referendum is that widespread hatred of the Tory government coincides with the collapse of the Labour Party in what was once an historic stronghold. Labour was reduced to a single Scottish seat, polling just 18.5 percent. By comparison, as late as 2001, Labour dominated Scottish parliamentary politics, holding 56 of the then 72 Westminster seats on 47 percent of the vote.

Even the temporary revival in support for the Labour Party following Jeremy Corbyn's rise to leadership was far less marked than in England and Wales. Instead, significant sections of workers shifted their allegiance to the SNP—which shed its former reputation as the "Tartan Tories" and successfully rebranded itself as a nominally "left" party.

As a result, in December the SNP won 48 of the 59 seats available in Scotland, an increase of 13, on 45 percent of the vote. Moreover, in contrast to its gains in England at Labour's expense, Johnson's Tories lost 7 seats, leaving them with only 6 on 25 percent of the vote.

The SNP seeks to exploit these gains to reverse the result of the 2014 referendum on independence, which returned a 55 to 45 percent majority against. They do so based on claims that this is now the only way of insulating Scotland from rule by the most right-wing government in post-war British history.

Such claims are belied by the SNP's own record in office in cutting social spending. But it argues that these cuts have been made necessary by rule from Westminster, even as it has used additional tax revenues for Scotland under the Barnett formula to fund high-profile concessions such as no university fees for Scottish students.

However, by far the most important spur for a renewed independence push by the SNP is Brexit, given that Scotland backed membership of the European Union (EU) in the 2016 Brexit referendum by a large majority of 62 to 38 percent. The pro-NATO SNP has long specialised in advocating for the EU, while saying nothing about the European bloc's record of imposing austerity, anti-migrant measures and a sharp turn to state repression and militarism. The SNP only made the most pro-forma criticism of the state repression levelled against Catalonia by Spain—for fear of compromising its aspirations to EU membership.

One of the arguments used against the SNP in 2014 was that an independent Scotland would not be granted EU membership because Spain and other countries such as Belgium, facing their own national separatist movements, would block it.

Sturgeon hopes that this opposition will now be side-lined by concern at the economic impact of Brexit on the EU, given that Johnson intends to slash corporation tax and impose other measures designed to siphon overseas investment and productive capacity from the continent. Under such circumstances Scotland might now be considered an important pro-EU counterweight to Brexit Britain.

This is by no means certain, given that Spain is still involved in efforts to crush the Catalan independence drive. But tying independence to the issue of maintaining EU membership will no doubt broaden its appeal in Scotland post-Brexit. To this end, the Scottish government intends to "convene a number of round table meetings" to build a coalition for independence among "civic society, trade unions and the business community, religious and minority groups and our partners in local government."

Scottish Labour leader Richard Leonard looks set to join the initiative in the light of Labour's election debacle, stressing that the party will develop its own "clear, constitutional offer." Graham Smith, general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, maintained, "The democratic wishes of the people of Scotland need to be acknowledged. The Scottish Labour movement should support indyref2." Labour Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) Neil Findlay stated, "We cannot deny the people of Scotland a second referendum where the majority is calling for it," while Alison Evison, president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, said on Twitter that a decision to back indyref2 was "straight-forward."

Calls have also re-emerged for Scottish Labour to sever links with the party in England and Wales. MSP Monica Lennon, a supporter of Leonard, complained, "We either continue at the mercy of the UK party's distant structures or we become a party in our own right."

But the most enthusiastic advocates of Scottish nationalism as a supposed alternative to Tory rule and austerity are the pseudo-left groups.

In the front-ranks stands the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), whose co-leader Colin Fox wrote three days after the general election, "Faced with

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five years of Tory minority rule the case for independence is now more urgent than ever," pledging that the SSP "will work with others … as part of our determination to 'Get independence done' as soon as possible."

The "others" are led by the SNP, of which Fox writes, "The result places heavy responsibilities on the SNP as the bearer of the case for independence." The SSP claims independence is "an essential democratic route to a Scotland ending poverty, tackling the housing shortage and introducing free public transport as part of real action to tackle the climate emergency."

It is nothing of the sort. Like Brexit, support for Scottish independence expresses the rise of inter-imperialist, national and regional tensions within the bourgeoisie provoked by the escalating conflict for control of global markets and resources.

Johnson wants to leave the EU so that he can deepen "the Thatcher revolution" of deregulation, privatisation and corporate tax cutting at the expense of the working class. He seeks a closer economic, political and military alliance with the US to strengthen the hand of British imperialism against its main European rivals.

The SNP, for all its efforts to pose as "progressive," is seeking a greater share of Scotland's assets for the regional bourgeoisie and its middle-class hangers-on, including North Sea oil and gas tax revenues, and to secure relations with the major corporations by offering low business taxes and stepped-up exploitation of the working class. The party boasts of its "great record in attracting firms to come to Scotland," before promising that "with independence we can do more."

To conceal its own pro-business agenda, the SNP and its apologists focus all attention on what they term the "democratic deficit." This refers to the fact that Scotland consistently voted against the Tories and for progressive left policies but saw both these aspirations thwarted by results in the UK. However, this is not a Scottish question, but an issue facing the entire British working class. It means above all confronting the historic failure of Labour's now abandoned perspective of national reformism.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as industry after industry and millions of jobs were destroyed by successive Tory governments, it was the Labour Party and the trade unions who betrayed every struggle mounted by workers. When Labour came to power after 18 years in 1997, it continued and even deepened Thatcher's anti-working-class offensive—reaching its nadir when Tony Blair took Britain into the illegal war with Iraq in 2003. This record also includes one of Blair's earliest decisions, the 1997 referendum to set up a Scottish parliament, which Labour led for eight years, with a mandate for encouraging regional competition and a mission to sow divisions by promoting national identity against class unity.

The Labour Party never truly recovered from these betrayals. But the price paid by the working class in Scotland was the ascendancy of the SNP.

The pseudo-left forces, who historically worked to subordinate workers to the Labour Party and still do so in England, have played the crucial role in offering a "left" apologia for this regressive turn to nationalism. When the SSP was first formed in 1998, we explained, "For Marxists, socialism is the product of the independent political action of the working class. This necessitates workers understanding that their social and political interests cannot be reconciled with those of the bourgeoisie.

"Ever since the publication of the Communist Manifesto in 1848, internationalism has been the cornerstone of the struggle for socialism. Nationalism is the ideology of the bourgeoisie, because its rule developed through and led to the consolidation of the nation state. Socialism, by its very nature, can only be a world system realised through the unification of workers across all borders. Its aim is to end the division of the global economy into antagonistic nations by liberating production from the fetters of private ownership, placing it at the service of the world's people. This requires the development of a consistent internationalist outlook amongst workers."

The "perspective of Scottish separatism—a struggle 'against Britain' and 'for Scotland'… ties the working class politically to the bourgeoisie, while pitting Scottish workers against those in other countries."

The SEP insisted that the extraordinary integration of the world economy under globalisation was the most graphic confirmation of the necessity for workers to base their struggles on an internationalist perspective and break from the reformist perspective developed at the turn of the century by the British Fabians and once championed by the Labour Party and similar parties throughout the world.

In contrast, the pseudo-left groups portray socialism as the product of a gradual process of reforms implemented through the Scottish Parliament. As the SEP wrote, they never examine "the reasons for the failure of these organisations and their transformation into open agents of global capitalism. Nor do they seek to account for the collapse of the Soviet Union, the most graphic example of the tragic consequences of a repudiation of socialist internationalism, embodied in the Stalinist perspective of 'socialism in one country'…" Neither do they "address the bitter experience made by workers with separatist movements around the world, such as in the former Yugoslavia."

The SEP explained, "Today, the world economy predominates over all national economies. Massive transnational corporations transfer production to wherever they can achieve a higher rate of return on their capital. To attract inward investment and remain competitive in the world market, every country, and even competing regions within countries, is engaged in a frantic scrabble to demolish welfare provisions and slash the living standards of working people. The movement for Scottish independence is rooted in these developments."

Based on its internationalist and revolutionary perspective, the SEP called on workers to vote "no" in the September 18, 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. We insisted, "The unity and independence of the working class is the criterion against which every political party and every political initiative must be judged. This is essential under conditions in which the planet is being befouled with nationalist poison.

"Scotland is not an oppressed nation, but part of an imperialist state. Its ruling elite has committed countless crimes and shared in the brutal exploitation of millions the world over. Waving the Saltire in people's faces is meant to conceal the basic fact that workers in Scotland are not oppressed because of their nationality, but because of their class position within capitalist society. This is just as reactionary as the waving of the Union Flag by their opponents …

"The advocacy of Scottish independence is a reactionary response to the bankruptcy of the nation-state system, which no longer corresponds to the global organisation of economic life. In the last century, this fundamental contradiction gave rise to two of the most devastating wars in human history as the leading capitalist powers fought for world hegemony. Today, with the advent of global production, in which every country's economy is integrated into a greater whole dominated by huge transnational corporations and banks, inter-imperialist and national antagonisms have reached a new peak of intensity."

The SEP insisted, "The only progressive response to the crisis of the nation-state system is to bring an end to all national divisions by adopting the perspective of socialist internationalism. … The SEP is for the overthrow of British imperialism and its state apparatus, not a negotiated settlement to set up a new repressive state.

"The SEP calls for the creation of a workers' government committed to socialist policies. We stand for the formation of the United Socialist States of Europe, not the Balkan-style carve-up of the continent led by grasping regional elites who will use a 'yes' vote in Scotland as a green light for their own separatist agendas."

During that campaign, we noted that the SSP's Colin Fox made this anti-working-class, anti-socialist agenda of Scottish nationalism explicit, when he declared, "[T]he classic left argument that Scottish independence

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would undermine the unity of the British working class" is "for us, an out-of-date formulation."

We countered that "if national identity outweighs class unity in Britain, then it outweighs it everywhere. … This is a recipe for political reaction all along the line," urging once again, "No one should forget the tragic experience of Yugoslavia, whose breakup in the 1990s triggered a decade of bloody civil wars and a catastrophic collapse in living standards."

This remains a prescient warning.

The pseudo-left groups are so enamoured as to the possible rewards for themselves—positions in central and local government, trade unions, academia and various Scottish cultural institutions—and so hostile to any form of independent political struggle by the working class that they appear blind to the reactionary implications of the policies they advocate.

All of them hail Catalan nationalism as their inspiration—because this too is the nationalism of a relatively prosperous region seeking greater control of tax revenues.

They do so with no reference to how nationalism is employed to sanction a major strengthening of the state apparatus for use against the entire Spanish working class. The Socialist Party Scotland (SPS), which continues relations with the Socialist Party of England and Wales from which the SSP split, pledged to demand "that the Scottish government organise the referendum in defiance of Johnson and the Tories."

The former British ambassador turned SNP advocate Craig Murray goes further still, demanding, "We organise a referendum … When we win we declare Independence. That is it. If they want to repeat the Yugoslav invasion of Slovenia in 1992, we fight them off like the Slovenes did."

The general election made clear that the Labour Party never truly recovered from its long history of betrayals and the collapse of its national reformist perspective, not just in Scotland but anywhere in the UK. Corbyn's bogus "leftism" could not long conceal his refusal to wage any struggle against the Blairites and adaptation to their every policy demand.

Yet everywhere the call of the pseudo-left is for them to turn sharply to nationalism—in England also where the same parties advocating for Scottish independence, and EU membership, are insisting that a policy of "left Brexit" and embrace of the "progressive patriotism" now championed by the Corbynite left is the way forward.

Neither Scottish nor English workers have anything in common with those urging a contemporary re-enactment of the Battle of Bannockburn. Rather they must wage a unified class struggle for socialism against the bourgeoisie, no matter what flag they wave, and build the internationalist leadership necessary to do so.

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