

Scottish National Party gripped by factional warfare after Alex Salmond acquitted of concocted sex charges

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Alex Salmond, former Scottish first minister and ex-leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), currently a chat show host for RT, was acquitted March 23 at the High Court in Edinburgh, Scotland, of 13 sexual offence charges, including attempted rape, against nine women.

Salmond was found not guilty on 12 counts, while one was found “not proven,” which legally amounts to the same thing. The verdicts were by majority from a jury, nine of whose members were female. Had Salmond been found guilty on the most serious charges, he would have faced years in prison.

He indicated his intention to publish a book and reveal more of the affair after the coronavirus crisis was over. Some of his political allies were more vocal.

Joanna Cherry, a lawyer, and the SNP’s Justice and Home Affairs spokesperson in Westminster, said, “As a feminist, lawyer and former specialist sex crimes prosecutor I fully support the right of all women who make a complaint of a sexual crime to have their complaint properly investigated. However, I also support due process and the principle of innocent until proven guilty.” Cherry also criticised the Scottish government and her own party over how complaints against Salmond were handled.

Former Scottish Justice Minister Kenny MacAskill, writing in the *Scotsman*, stated that “only the tip of the iceberg came out during the trial.” He warned of “WhatsApp groups from a coterie of leading party individuals...seeking to do much more than simply a citizen’s duty of cooperating with the police. ... A few have acted despicably and many of us feel a breach of trust. To whom do these individuals work and for what purpose are they acting?”

The outcome threatens to break the SNP wide open, setting Salmond and his supporters against his successor and current first minister, Nicola Sturgeon. It also exposes the party’s deeply right-wing, anti-democratic and militarist character.

The case followed an investigation by the Scottish government into Salmond’s alleged sexual misconduct, which the Scottish government admitted in court was “tainted by apparent bias.” Salmond won a 2019 judicial review against the government he once led, and was awarded £512,000 in compensation, having crowd-funded his legal expenses.

The judicial review was not the end of the matter, however. On January 24 of last year, Salmond was charged on two counts of attempted rape and 12 of sexual assault following a Police

Scotland investigation based on allegations passed to them by the Scottish government.

Twenty-two police officers were set to work on the case and conducted interviews with 386 people. All the charges related to events between 2008 and 2014.

The trial saw claims made that were impossible to verify, implausible and sometimes disproven in court. Witness H, a former leading official in the Scottish government, told the court of two alleged incidents when Salmond made unwanted sexual advances towards her, both in 2014. Salmond’s defence team called on witnesses, who were able to confirm to the jury that Witness H had not been in attendance at the dinner after which Salmond was alleged to have attacked her.

Witness H told the court she did not report either event until November 2017, when she started experiencing “flashbacks” simultaneous with the emergence of the #MeToo right-wing feminist movement worldwide. She did not contact the police, but instead spoke to the SNP’s compliance officer, Ian McCann. Witness H was reported as saying she wanted the incident on Salmond’s SNP record, should he attempt return to frontline politics. A text message from McCann was read in court that stated, “We will sit on that and hope we never need to deploy it.”

Another text from Witness H, sent to another of the complainants against Salmond, was read in court. “I have a plan. And means we can be anonymous but see strong repercussions.” An earlier text, from 2015, was also presented, in which Witness H texted an SNP officeholder about a personal project she had. She asked if “Alex will be OK” with her project. “Would be great to be working with him again,” she continued.

Other witnesses gave accounts of minor incidents that happened many years previously, if at all. Woman A, a leading government official, said that over a three-week period in 2008 Salmond would habitually greet her with a slobbery kiss on the lips, and touched her back and backside. Witness C said Salmond touched her leg in a government car some time in 2011. Salmond said he had apologised to Witness F for his behaviour during a boozy encounter in Bute House.

Woman J said Salmond, one evening in Bute House, imitated a zombie then tried to kiss her and touched her leg. Woman G gave evidence that Salmond tried to recreate a suggestive scene on a Christmas card, grabbed the woman’s wrists and tried to kiss her.

Salmond told the jury that he wished he had been “more careful with people’s personal space, but there was no intention whatsoever to offend.” He insisted he had never had “non-consensual relations with anyone.” He was of the opinion that, “for a variety of reasons, events are being reinterpreted and exaggerated out of all possible proportion.” He accused Witness A, a senior official in the Scottish government, of encouraging others to “exaggerate or make claims” against him.

After the acquittal, it was reported that Salmond’s QC, Gordon Jackson, had been prevented by the judge, Lady Dorrian, from presenting a block of evidence showing, in Jackson’s words, “there was [a] concerted effort made by people in the government to influence this process, to get it as best they could in terms of criminal prosecution.” The texts included one sent by Leslie Evans, permanent secretary to the Scottish government, after the judicial review in 2019. The text, sent to another leading official, read, “We may have lost the battle, but we will win the war.”

Commenting on the implications of the affair for Nicola Sturgeon, *Herald* writer Ian MacWhirter noted, “There are questions about what Ms Sturgeon knew about the complaints about Mr Salmond and when she knew about them. But a far bigger question is the extent to which she acquiesced in this attempt to destroy the politician, who was her mentor and closest political ally for decades.

“Mr. Salmond could have gone to jail for the rest of his life. In the era of MeToo and Harvey Weinstein it is extremely difficult for men in public life to mount defences against charges like these. Ms Sturgeon avoided giving evidence in this High Court, but she will have to answer to the parliamentary inquiry, currently suspended.

“She continues to defend Mr Salmond’s accusers, who remain in their posts even after their allegations were dismissed by the highest court in the land. I can’t name these people because, even though the jury did not believe them, they still enjoy anonymity.”

MacWhirter noted that the Scottish Crown Office “has questions to answer too, about why it went ahead with this prosecution when so many of the charges were obviously *de minimis*.”

Further investigations are said to be in the hands of the Metropolitan Police, trawling Salmond’s time in London as a Westminster MP, while elements of the Scottish press have continued to blackguard him. He has been the subject of what appears to be a sinister campaign emerging from within the SNP and the Scottish government, taken up by Police Scotland, the Crown Office, #MeToo supporters and backed by sections of the media. It exposes the anti-democratic forces within the SNP and the British establishment, and once again underscores the right-wing character of #MeToo.

Earlier this week, First Minister Sturgeon was forced to retract her proposal, under the cover of a particularly draconian Coronavirus Bill, to abolish jury trials for the duration of the crisis, rather than merely postpone cases, as in England.

Commentary has centred on the possibility of Salmond’s return to active political life and re-applying for SNP membership, which he dropped to defend himself legally. He is said to be seeking nomination for a seat in the Scottish parliamentary elections next year.

There have been growing tensions between the Salmond and Sturgeon factions for years now. Salmond is considered more willing to force the issue of a second Scottish independence referendum, in defiance, if necessary, of Westminster and the British government. Much of the SNP’s nationalist membership, many of whom joined after the 2014 referendum, are frustrated at Sturgeon’s resistance to another poll, which she has been hinting of ever since the Brexit vote of 2016, and the collapse of the Remain campaign to delay or reverse Brexit.

What has brought this to an extraordinary pitch, however, is Salmond’s broadcasting career, taken up since 2017. The first episode of Salmond’s show for the Russian government-backed RT was aired November 16, 2017, which coincides almost exactly with the point at which allegations against Salmond began to emerge.

Salmond’s move drove sections of the British media and foreign policy establishment apoplectic. Sturgeon herself at the time said she “would have advised against RT and suggested he seek a different channel.” SNP Member of the European Parliament Alyn Smith told a Scottish paper, “What the f**k is he thinking?”

Jon Snow, Channel 4 TV’s lead news presenter, railed against Salmond, asking, “Wouldn’t Scottish television give you a slot, wouldn’t they pay you enough? The Russians are paying you the most, why do you think they’re doing that?” Labour peer George Foulkes, a Privy Council member, said, “He is like a tool of the Russians by doing this...it is close to treason.”

Salmond’s pursuit of a lucrative broadcasting career and a platform for his views cut across the efforts of the SNP and Sturgeon to ingratiate themselves with the British and US military apparatus. The SNP’s policy on Trident nuclear weapons has been to couple longstanding calls for their removal to a replacement with fast jets and warships capable of integrating into NATO’s North Atlantic drive against Russia. In 2015, Sturgeon told the United States Council on Foreign Relations that the SNP considers itself a “key ally of the United States” and “supportive of the sanctions against Russia and [has] been a voice of support within the UK for the government’s position.”

The SNP’s defence spokesman in Westminster, Stewart McDonald, has repeatedly denounced RT, while criticising the British government for not doing enough to back the fascist regime in the Ukraine against Russia. In 2018, McDonald insisted the then-Tory government of Theresa May should oppose the Nord Stream 2 oil pipeline and the “security threat that it so obviously represents to the United Kingdom and the [NATO] alliance.”



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