

Scotland: Journalist Craig Murray charged with contempt of court over Alex Salmond trial

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Craig Murray, the former British diplomat turned writer and commentator, is facing contempt of court charges arising from his reporting of last month's trial of former Scottish National Party (SNP) leader and Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond.

Salmond was found not guilty at the High Court in Edinburgh of multiple charges of sexual assault and attempted rape during his period as first minister in the devolved Scottish parliament.

If found guilty by a judge—there is no jury in contempt of court cases—Murray could face up to two years in jail and/or an unlimited fine.

On his website, Murray, an SNP supporter, reported that four other Scottish nationalist social media commentators had also been warned by the police of possible contempt charges while a journalist, unnamed, has had his house raided and computers seized by police from the “Alex Salmond team.”

A police van had parked outside his house two days before he was charged. Elements within the media appeared to be aware of the charges against him before they were served, indicating collusion between the press and the police.

Murray is not well liked by the establishment. His perceptive and widely read reporting of the show trial of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has earned him hatred and enmity in ruling circles. But the legal charges and police intimidation used against him point fundamentally to the immense tensions building up around the Scottish government and the SNP leadership in the aftermath of Salmond's acquittal. Instigated by the prosecution team at Salmond's trial, they appear to be an attempt to suppress public knowledge of what was revealed by the trial—a high level conspiracy to send Salmond to jail on the flimsiest of charges.

Moves against Salmond have been building since 2016, when the former first minister hinted at his disagreement with the slow progress towards a second referendum on

Scottish independence in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. These tensions escalated hugely following his move to Russian broadcaster RT, where he continues to host a weekly show. Sex allegations against Salmond surfaced shortly after.

Salmond was first charged in January 2019, days after winning a judicial review in which the Scottish government admitted an internal investigation into the claims against Salmond was “tainted by apparent bias.” Salmond won £512,000 in compensation.

Last month's High Court case exposed the lack of any evidence against Salmond beyond uncorroborated testimony and hearsay. Murray's commentary also drew out the extraordinarily close relationship between the anonymous female complainers and the current leadership of the SNP. He highlighted evidence revealed in court of orchestration between some of the complainants.

On his blog, Murray has posted an image of the charges against him, all of which relate to articles and comments posted between August 23, 2019 and April 3, 2020. He is accused of having “impeded or prejudiced” the case against Salmond by his posts. Murray has been singled out despite a deluge of prejudicial images, distorted and partial reporting from the Scottish media, mostly supportive of Salmond's accusers and political opponents.

Neil Mackay, at the *Glasgow Herald*, for example, wrote March 8 of looking back at “a few great trials of the past which, while in no way connected with next week's events, had huge wider significance.” These included the trials of Nazi organiser of the Holocaust Adolf Eichmann, as well as mass murderers Charles Manson and Peter Sutcliffe.

Murray has noted that he had been charged with contempt after the trial and not before or during it. This would be a “serious act of negligence” if his reporting had in fact prejudiced the trial.

Murray has also been charged with publishing material which could lead to an identification of one of the

complainants, “Ms. A.” He did not identify anyone. One commentator noted correctly that the evidence which could supposedly be used to identify Ms. A. is part of the record of the trial. Murray pointed out that if he was guilty of this offence then so were much of the British media, including the *Times*, *Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *Guardian*, *Daily Record*, *Herald*, *Aberdeen Press and Journal* and *Scotland on Sunday*—all of whom reported the same information, sometimes more explicitly, which remains readily available on all their web sites.

For people with knowledge of the internal life of the SNP, Ms. A.’s identity can readily be worked out from the events described during the trial. But Ms. A., as with all the other complainants, has been granted lifetime anonymity because of the failed case against Salmond. As a result, any role played by SNP First Minister Nicola Sturgeon in bringing proceedings against Salmond remains obscure.

Salmond ally and former Scottish Justice Secretary and lawyer, the SNP MP for East Lothian Kenny MacAskill, noted in the *Scottish Left Review* that much of the case against Salmond seemed to be “offered up to Police Scotland on a platter by senior government and SNP sources ... Some charges were utter bunkum and the likes of which I’ve never seen in 40 years involvement in the courts; and certainly not in the High Court.”

Jim Sillars, a former deputy leader of the SNP, wrote of Salmond, “The book he is writing, with the material he was not allowed to produce at trial, but which has all the authenticity of Scottish government and SNP party documents, will be like a volcano going off underneath some people. Some whose identities I and others know, but cannot name, must tremble at the prospect of what is to come.”

Sillars’ and MacAskill’s comments underscore the politically explosive implications of the faction fight raging in the SNP and why such extraordinary measures are being taken to silence Murray.

The SNP has been the ruling party in Scotland since 2007. It has a dominant position in the Scottish parliament, Scottish local authorities and holds most Scottish seats in the British parliament.

Sturgeon is currently playing a key role on behalf of the entire British ruling class in organising a return to work in the midst of the raging COVID-19 pandemic. She poses as a “progressive” counterweight to Boris Johnson’s Conservative government, while to all intents advocating the same policies.

The Salmond affair could bring down Sturgeon, collapse the Scottish government and blow the SNP to bits, exposing its toxic internal relations, wrecking its political authority, and confirming its bitter hostility to the working class. The party has for decades assiduously sought to foster a leftish

veneer, now much eroded, in its pitch to Scottish voters.

Yet no party in Scotland can easily replace the SNP. Its rise to unchallenged prominence was due to having successfully exploited the rightward evolution of the Labour Party, which is now almost as hated as the Tories. Talks of an SNP split or “clear-out at the highest levels” favoured by Sillars, Murray, MacAskill and, perhaps, Salmond testify to the possibility of the SNP imploding—leaving Scotland without a functioning government and further destabilising the whole of the UK.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers, young people, artists and academics, and all those concerned with the defence of democratic rights to demand all charges are dropped and Murray be allowed to continue his work. The charges against him prove the willingness of the SNP leadership and the Scottish state to dispense with democratic and legal norms in defence of their interests. But this does not imply any support for Murray’s nationalist politics or for the Salmond faction, which represents a clique of pro-business figures with a record of attacks on the working class no less filthy than Sturgeon’s.

The unprincipled faction fight within the SNP lends perfect expression to the reactionary politics of Scottish nationalism. The SNP is seeking to transform an “independent” Scotland into a low-tax investment platform for major corporations seeking access to the European market. It will be paid for by the destruction of the living standards of the working class, facilitated by driving a nationalist wedge between Scottish and English workers when a unified struggle against British and world imperialism is essential.



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