

Sturgeon's future in jeopardy as Scottish National Party civil war intensifies

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Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's hold on power is weakening as a vicious three-year faction fight within and around the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Scottish government comes to a head.

An attempt by Sturgeon's close allies to railroad former SNP leader and Sturgeon's mentor Alex Salmond to jail on MeToo-inspired sex charges has backfired spectacularly, with an election to the Scottish parliament due on May 6.

A confidence vote in the Scottish parliament against Sturgeon may be called next week. The SNP does not currently have a majority, relying instead on the Greens.

Sturgeon has been accused by the all-party Committee on the Scottish Government Handling of Harassment Complaints of providing misleading information. Leaks suggest the committee has concluded it was "hard to believe" Sturgeon's account of when she knew about sexual complaints against Salmond and that her account of a meeting with her predecessor in April 2018 was "inaccurate".

Sturgeon therefore misled parliament, breaching a ministerial code to which she wrote the foreword, although the committee is said to have omitted accusations that she did so "knowingly". The final report is due to be released Tuesday. Another inquiry, led by former Irish Director of Public Prosecutions, James Hamilton into possible breaches of the ministerial code by Sturgeon is also due to report shortly.

Sturgeon and her government have been on the defensive since Salmond gave long-delayed evidence to the harassment committee late February this year. The committee was established following Salmond's 2019 victory in a judicial review, which found that the Scottish government's moves against him were "unlawful in respect that they were procedurally unfair" and were "tainted by apparent bias".

The Scottish authorities nevertheless persisted with a criminal trial. Salmond was duly acquitted on all 13 counts, including attempted rape, in March 2020.

In a statement to the harassment committee, Salmond

accused leading SNP figures, including Sturgeon's husband, Peter Murrell, of "a malicious and concerted attempt to damage my reputation and remove me from public life in Scotland." He told the committee that text messages between SNP officers amounted to "behaviour that was about not only pressurising the police... but about pressurising witnesses and collusion with witnesses. We are talking about the construction of evidence, because the police were somehow felt to be inadequate in finding it themselves."

Sturgeon's performance at the committee five days later was evasive on key issues. She rejected Salmond's charges but suffered several memory lapses. In her opening statement, she insisted the first she heard of allegations against Salmond was April 2, 2018, "a moment in my life that I will never forget". The committee appear to have rejected Sturgeon's version of this meeting.

Much hypocritical outrage is being vented at Sturgeon's expense. Labour and the Conservatives, both trailing far behind the SNP in the Scottish polls, sense an opportunity to damage the SNP and derail moves towards a second independence referendum.

"We cannot set a precedent that a First Minister of Scotland can mislead the Scottish Parliament and get away with it," said Scottish Tory leader Douglas Ross, whose party in the UK is led by serial liar Boris Johnson. "This is about the integrity of our Scottish Parliament and upholding standards in public life," said newly elected Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar, whose party has just witch-hunted its own membership and driven out its former leader, Jeremy Corbyn, on bogus anti-Semitism charges.

Supporters of both Salmond and Sturgeon are savaging each other on social media and in the press. Neither side deserves the slightest support or political sympathy.

Salmond, on available evidence, has been the target of a factionally motivated campaign by the SNP leadership, utilising a sex scandal, and all the resources available to a ruling party against him. But he led the SNP for decades and has played a major role in creating its internal life.

Fundamentally, the methods of settling differences deployed by the SNP are an expression of its character as a bourgeois party and the social types it attracts and for whom it speaks. The sex scandal is the traditional tool of bourgeois score settling precisely because a frank exposure of the actual class agendas and interests animating faction fights within ruling circles must be concealed from the broad mass of the working-class population.

The SNP's perspective is to create a more or less "independent" capitalist state in Scotland, based on hiving off as much as possible of the UK's assets and resources to create an investment platform, primarily oriented to the European Union (EU), based on cheap labour and austerity for workers and tax breaks for the financial oligarchy.

Appealing to a wealthy layer of Scottish based capitalists, the country's large financial and service sector, investment agencies, sections of the upper middle class and trade union bureaucracy, the SNP conceals this bitterly anti-working-class agenda through routine deployment of Scottish nationalism, identity politics, and a marginally more "left" or progressive sounding tone than the rightward-careening Labour Party in both Edinburgh and in London.

The party is aided in this by a jumble of pseudo-left tendencies, think tanks and campaigns promoting the lie that Scottish independence might create a platform for social reform.

Beyond personal feuding, the SNP's crisis hinges above all on how to sell this perspective to the Scottish population as a viable alternative, while securing the backing of the European Union, on which the fate of the "independence" agenda rests.

The SNP has long coined the slogan "Independence in Europe", on the understanding that access to European markets, trade and cheap labour was essential to the expansion of corporate profit in tiny Scotland. One factor which lost the SNP the 2014 independence referendum by 55 to 45 percent was that continued membership of the EU could only be guaranteed through maintaining the 300-year-old United Kingdom, then an EU member. The EU itself, with an eye on similar separatist movements in Belgium, Italy and particularly Spain, avoided giving any encouragement to the SNP.

In 2016, the UK voted to leave the EU, while Scotland voted by a large majority, 62 to 38 percent, to remain. Sturgeon, who replaced Salmond following his resignation in the aftermath of the 2014 poll, announced that a second referendum was "inevitable". But she became the de facto leader of efforts to keep the UK in the EU by overturning the Leave vote. Moves to a second independence poll were kicked down the road.

Salmond, and a layer of close political allies, aided by the

pseudo-left, let it be known they were unhappy with this. When the Catalan regional government held a referendum without approval from the central government in Madrid in 2017, many within and around the SNP considered this a model worth emulating. The campaign for "indyref2", which served as a diversion for growing class tensions and hostility to the SNP's ever more right-wing social policy, began to build momentum.

Sturgeon was not of this opinion, believing that any embrace of a constitutionally illegal separatist agenda would still alienate the EU, even given post Brexit tensions with the UK. The European parliament this month laid the basis for the Catalan leaders who organised the peaceful protests brutally attacked by police, and the 2017 poll, to be extradited to Spain to face up to a decade in jail. Joining the EU would also entail an international border between Carlisle and Newcastle, dividing Scotland from its largest market England and Wales.

All manner of shifts and splits in the SNP could still emerge, but none of them will have the slightest progressive content. All variants under Sturgeon, Salmond, or any of their potential successors are deeply reactionary and rest on the vicious cranking up of the exploitation and division of the working class, under a toxic smokescreen of nationalism.

Workers and young people in Scotland have no reason to side with any faction of the SNP, its pseudo-left hangers on, or with the hated Labour and Tory parties of British imperialism. The task is the building of the Socialist Equality Party, rejecting all forms of nationalism and uniting workers against imperialism and for a socialist Britain within a United Socialist States of Europe, as part of a world socialist federation.



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