Sturgeon resigns, Scottish National Party in crisis

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At the age of 52, Nicola Sturgeon has chosen to walk away from her roles as first minister of Scotland and leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP). Her resignation has multiple immediate causes, but all point to a crisis engulfing not only the SNP but the entire political project of Scottish separatism.

Depending on Sturgeon's successor, the SNP's coalition with the Greens may collapse, triggering an unpredictable Scottish general election.

Speaking in Bute House, her official residence in Edinburgh since 2014 when she replaced Alex Salmond as first minister, Sturgeon indicated divisions in the SNP over her proposal for the next UK general election. "My preference of using the next Westminster election as a de facto referendum is well known. I've never pretended it is perfect."

Last December, the UK Supreme Court ruled that the Scottish government did not have the authority to legislate for a second referendum, should the UK government not agree with it. Since then the SNP has been searching for a mechanism to continue its push to overturn the result of the 2014 referendum when Scotland voted by 55 to 45 percent to remain in the UK.

Sturgeon's preference was for a general election in which every vote for the SNP, and any other pro-independence party, would be construed as a vote to break from the UK. The proposal was a concession to hardline nationalists within the SNP and outside it, in the form of Salmond's Alba Party and various pseudo-left hangers on of both parties. A special SNP conference, now cancelled, was to have taken place next month to discuss it.

Her proposal suited neither those wishing to avoid an immediate focus on independence, or the hardline nationalists. A poll carried out by Lord Ashcroft Polling estimated that, of SNP voters, only 44 percent supported the scheme. Among voters in general, support collapsed to 21 percent. Many commentators noted that even in 2015, the SNP's most successful Scottish election campaign, the party only won 49 percent of the vote. Nationalist writer Iain McWhirter wrote in the *Spectator*, "MPs in Westminster began to shift uneasily in their seats since they are in the front line of this kamikaze assault on the UK constitution."

Leader of the SNP in Westminster, Stephen Flynn, was known to oppose the plan. Sturgeon loyalist and NATO warmonger, Stewart McDonald, authored a report complaining that the proposal was impatient.

Rather than fighting this out, Sturgeon threw in the towel, declaring, "By making my decision clear now I free the SNP to choose the path that it believes to be the right one, without worrying about the perceived implications for my leadership and in the knowledge that a new leader will steer us, I believe, successfully on that path."

Sturgeon's decision has echoes of the recent resignation of Jacinda Adern in New Zealand, as both saw political storms ahead and decided it was better to leave politics and go and make some serious money.

Gender recognition row

In all such political crises, there are immediate contributory factors. Sturgeon's position was already unsafe. In recent weeks she had attempted to shore up support in layers of the party's middle-class constituency with a Gender Recognition Reform Bill intended to reduce the time, bureaucratic hurdles and medical examinations required to formally change one's legal gender—similar to measures introduced in nine European countries.

The bill included a reduction in the age at which someone could legally change their gender and was intended also as a (cost free) means of broadening the SNP's support among young people, a key constituency in their drive for independence. It was extensively debated in the Scottish parliament and passed with a large majority.

The British Conservative government used Section 35 of the Scotland Act 1998 to prevent the Scottish bill from becoming law. It was opposed by 15 members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), mainly on religious grounds, and feminists within and outside the SNP, who believe the legislation undermines single-sex safe spaces. But more damaging for Sturgeon was the opposition to the proposals of two thirds of the electorate in opinion polls, with only 20 percent in favour.

Things were made worse for Sturgeon by a scandal surrounding two transgender women who had been convicted of sex offences while living as men, one of rape, being approved to serve their terms in women's prisons.

In addition, there is an ongoing police investigation into the SNP's finances, and a trove of emails hacked from Stewart McDonald's email account.

The history of the SNP

But the SNP's crisis is rooted above all in the acute social tensions between workers in Scotland, the UK and internationally, and the financial oligarchy. This has fatally undermined the party's ability to pose as a progressive alternative to the Tories and the Labour Party.

From its formation in 1934, the SNP articulated the interests of sections of the Scottish landed aristocracy, bourgeoisie and upper middle class. It remained on the political margins until the 1960s, when the collapse of much of Britain's industrial base and the discovery of oil in the North Sea gave them an angle with which to exploit broader social grievances.

In 1974, in conditions of a mass movement in the working class across Britain against the then Tory government, the party expressed its visceral hostility to working people with the selfish nationalist slogan "It's Scotland's Oil," seeking a means of enriching themselves while

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presenting oil wealth as the means to overcome endemic poverty in Scotland.

The Labour Party accurately defined the SNP as "Tartan Tories" but adopted some of their prescriptions as a means of sowing regional divisions in the working class. In 1979, at a time of mass struggle against the Labour government's austerity policies known as the "Winter of Discontent", Labour held a Home Rule referendum for the establishment of a Scottish assembly. The result, 52 percent to 48 percent for the assembly, failed to reach a 40 percent participation threshold to be implemented. In response, the SNP, now with a handful of MPs, brought down the Labour government and opened the door to Margaret Thatcher's Tories.

Throughout the huge class battles of the 80s, and the destruction of manufacturing industry in the 80s and 90s across Britain, both the Labour Party in Scotland and the SNP competed to present the social disasters imposed on the working class in explicitly nationalist and pro-capitalist terms. For Labour the solution was regional devolution, through which Scottish industrial and financial interests could attract globally mobile investment. For the SNP, the key to attracting investment was independence, within the European Union trade block, to counter reliance on the UK economy, and low taxes to attract global investors.

The SNP benefitted for years from the lurch to the right by the UK's major parties. It successfully exploited hostility to the Tories during their 18 years in office, focusing on the fact that workers in Scotland voted Labour but still got Tory governments. Then, when Labour finally won office in 1997, they were easily able to portray themselves as to the left of Tony Blair's "New Labour" government, with its wholesale adoption of Thatcherite economic nostrums.

Blair's Labour government sought to pull the SNP's wings off and encourage regional competition for foreign direct investment by legislating in 1998 for a new referendum for a Scottish parliament. The result was an overwhelming "Yes" vote secured by a campaign led jointly by Labour's Donald Dewar and SNP leader Alex Salmond. A devolved government was created led by the Scottish Labour Party but in alliance with the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

Salmond capitalised on the Labour Party's continued shift to the right, open warmongering and the popular hatred it was inspiring through its role in slashing local government services and pushing forward privatisations. In 2007, he was elected First Minister and the SNP has been in power ever since.

Sturgeon succeeded her mentor Salmond in 2014 after the former resigned following defeat in the 2014 independence referendum. For years the party was able to combine complaints that Scotland was being prevented from pursing a progressive economic and social agenda by its subordination to England, while utilising higher per capita public spending agreed to as part of the devolution package to dress itself up in a left disguise.

The SNP's record in government

This fiction was always destined to collapse. The 2008 financial crisis saw Salmond frantically call for the British government to bail out Scottish-based bank RBS while the SNP ruthlessly imposed austerity measures, passing on to workers all the costs of propping up the financial oligarchy and supporting the transformation of every area of social spending into a revenue stream for the wealthy.

The SNP's actual role in government belied its pose as a friend of the working class. Running most of Scotland's local authorities, the party has intensified the assault on social spending. Currently, the SNP's flagship authority, Glasgow, is reported to be considering scrapping as many as 800 teachers' jobs, in response to a £60 million funding deficit. Other proposals including closing care homes and day centres, cutting homeless provisions and cutting or entirely ending support to as many as 237 charities running small-scale community projects.

In contrast, Sturgeon and the SNP have stepped up their drive to attract global investment. The party has signed up to Sunak's freeport, cheap labour and tax-break, schemes, with two locations identified. It is selling off vast swathes of land and seabed at rock-bottom prices for exploitation by privately owned wind power generators.

The pandemic also did much to undermine the SNP's pseudo-progressive posturing. While Sturgeon's down-to-earth daily press briefings made for a sharp contrast with the blatant mendacity of Boris Johnson, her underlying policies were identical, following the Tories' lifting of public health measures within a matter of weeks. Scotland has suffered 16,780 COVID-19 deaths of the UK total of 218,405 which, given the differences in population, is a close to identical death rate.

During the 1970s and 80s, the SNP postured as an opponent of militarism, particularly opposing nuclear weapons and nuclear dumping in rural Scottish locations. All this has been dropped. The party is now an open advocate of NATO militarism, supports the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine and seeks a role in NATO military doctrine for an independent Scotland's armed forces. It has not yet formally dropped opposition to Trident nuclear weapons being based on the Clyde, but that is purely a matter of time. Such manufacturing as is left in Scotland is massively dominated by the arms industry.

These realities meant that the SNP, while still by far Scotland's largest party, was only able to form a majority government in 2021 in a coalition with the Scottish Greens.

For the socialist unity of the working class

Acute social tensions produced by the cost-of-living crisis and exacerbated by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine mean that the Scottish government, like its UK and Welsh peers, has confronted a powerful movement in the working class. It too has depended on the trade unions to impose below-inflation pay agreements on local authority refuse workers, education workers, NHS staff, rail workers and many more.

Health provision in Scotland, as across the UK, is in deadly danger. The RCN nurses' union has suspended strike action on both sides of the border, leaving the NHS in Scotland in a parlous state, short of 2,000 GPs and 6,400 nurses and midwives and with 14 percent of consultant positions vacant.

Every major social issue facing working people in Scotland is identical to those facing workers in England, Wales and throughout the world—rooted in a global crisis and breakdown of world capitalism. With millions of workers fighting back in an objectively unified counteroffensive against all the governments and parties of big business, the fiction that an embrace of "civic nationalism", shorn of all nasty trappings, offers a path to economic security and democratic accountability is revealed as a fraud, along with the SNP's claim to represent all Scots, irrespective of class.

The SNP is on a collision course with the working class, no less decisively than the Tories and the Labour Party. This does not translate in some quasi-automatic fashion into a popular repudiation of the anti-working-class perspective of Scottish separatism. But it creates the most favourable basis for advancing a perspective of international working-class unity in a struggle for socialism.

Workers will come to understand that if the crisis they face is global and

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arises out of the basic contradictions of world capitalism, then the solution too, is necessarily global, unified and socialist.

At what it is now clear was the high-water mark of support for Scottish nationalism, during the 2014 independence referendum, the Socialist Equality Party explained:

"We are for a revolutionary struggle of the working class against all of the representatives of British imperialism and the financial oligarchy. We advocate a workers' government and a socialist Britain.

"We see this as inseparable from the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe.

"We are equally opposed to all those tendencies that have rallied behind the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the creation of a Scottish capitalist state. All efforts to equate anger towards the ruling elite with support for national separatism are fraudulent.

"A Scottish state will be no less beholden to the banks and major corporations than the UK. Its creation would signal a mad scramble to the bottom, as the governments in Westminster and Holyrood compete to cut the corporation tax and further slash wages and working-class conditions.

"From the essential standpoint of establishing the political independence of the working class, the most reactionary role in the referendum campaign has been played by Britain's fake-left groups. All of them have lined up behind the SNP, while dressing up its right-wing policies in pseudo-socialist garb.

"Their monomaniacal invocations of Scotland's 'right to self-determination' cannot conceal that these tendencies have nothing whatsoever to do with Marxism, socialism or the working class. They are bitter enemies of working people and their perspective is counterrevolutionary."

The assimilation of these fundamental lessons and taking the decision to act on them politically by joining and building the SEP is the task starkly posed before Scottish workers and young people.

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