

Nicola Sturgeon arrested as Scottish National Party crisis intensifies

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The arrest Sunday of former Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon intensifies the crisis of the ruling Scottish National Party (SNP) and points to raging factional divisions in the political establishment.

Sturgeon is the most senior SNP figure to be questioned as part of Police Scotland's Operation Branchform, its investigation into the SNP's finances. Sturgeon, who led the SNP for nine years until her sudden resignation earlier this year, attended by arrangement and was questioned for over seven hours before being released without charge.

Launched in 2021 following complaints from a hardline Scottish nationalist Sean Clerkin over the fate of cash raised to fund a campaign for a second referendum on independence, Operation Branchform officers have now arrested all three signatories to the SNP's financial accounts.

Sturgeon's husband Peter Murrell, who resigned from his position as the SNP's CEO shortly after Sturgeon's departure, was arrested and released in early April. Murrell and Sturgeon's home was searched, treated as a crime scene, with a police tent set up in their garden and computers and other material seized. The party's longtime treasurer Colin Beattie was also arrested and interviewed a fortnight later. Beattie too was released without charge.

The amounts at stake are significant for a British political party, whose finances are subject to relatively close public scrutiny. Some £666,953 was reportedly raised by nationalist campaigners to be ringfenced for a referendum. Also under investigation is a loan of £107,620 made by Murrell to the SNP, which was reported late to the Electoral Commission. Two repayments were made, but £60,000 was left outstanding.

Testifying to financial chaos bound up with the loss of 30,000 members in two years, the SNP had no auditors for months and only narrowly avoided losing access to parliamentary "short money"—funding paid to

Westminster parties—currently worth £1.2 million to the SNP.

As well as the party's finances, Operation Branchform is reported to have investigated "an extensive list of items", a police source told the *Daily Record* in April. These included expensive pots, pans, jewelry and a fridge freezer, while the police are also reported as searching for SIM cards and "burner" mobile phones, which are disposable and difficult to trace. A luxury camper van reportedly worth £110,000 was seized by the police.

Sturgeon's fall from grace will have negative political consequences for the SNP and her "continuity" successor, Humza Yousaf. Yousaf has so far refused to suspend Sturgeon from the party, despite pressure from its own MSPs, Ash Regan and Michelle Thomson.

A recent YouGov poll analysis predicted that the SNP would lose as many as 23 of the 45 Westminster seats it currently holds to the Labour Party. It may soon face a by-election test in the Rutherglen and Hamilton West constituency after former SNP MP Margaret Ferrier was suspended from the House of Commons for breaching COVID rules in the early stages of the pandemic. A recall petition has been launched which, if winning the support of 10 percent of the electorate, will trigger a vote.

The infighting within the SNP leading to Sturgeon's arrest began earlier, in 2017, centering on the feud between Sturgeon and her predecessor, Alex Salmond, now leader of his own Alba Party.

Salmond was the focus of a #MeToo style campaign seeking to prevent his return to political life after he resigned as SNP leader and First Minister following defeat in the 2014 independence poll. The campaign saw a huge police investigation, in both Scotland and London, with close collaboration between Sturgeon's inner circle, the Scottish government, the Crown Office, Police Scotland and the media. Salmond was cleared in 2020 of the multiple sex offence charges against him. Alba is now

promoting an electoral alliance of all the independence parties, including the pseudo-left Scottish Socialist Party.

More fundamentally, the infighting that has led to Sturgeon's downfall is a product of the bankruptcy of the Scottish independence project so heavily promoted by the pseudo-left, the reactionary character of which has been exposed by deepening class divisions and the de facto war between the NATO powers and Russia.

The SNP was once seen as being so right-wing as to be called the "Tartan Tories". But since the 1980s, the party sought to broaden its appeal and replace Labour as the dominant party in Scotland by posturing to the left of Labour on social questions and as an opponent of militarism. Independence, the SNP claimed, and the pseudo-left groups echoed, could provide the basis for implementing the type of social reforms the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher had declared war on and which were then abandoned by the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Blair's Thatcherite policies saw it electorally obliterated by the SNP in Scotland.

In power since 2007, the SNP for years levelled complaints that Scotland was prevented from pursuing a more progressive economic and social agenda by its ties to England, while utilising higher per capita public spending agreed to as part of the devolution package to dress itself up in a left guise.

All this has been exposed over the last years with the SNP embracing NATO militarism and war in Europe, while imposing brutal year-on-year public service cuts. These point to the character of any independent Scotland as a minor imperialist ally and participant in NATO, seeking global investment through corporate tax cuts and the imposition of brutal poverty and exploitation on the working class.

These shifts are now coming home to roost. An article in the *Financial Times* noted that the SNP "contains larger ideological and strategic divisions—over everything from defence to social policy to economics—than any of the UK's other major parties." Managing these divisions forced Salmond and Sturgeon after him to run the SNP with a very narrow clique of close acolytes.

Under pressures of deepening economic crisis and class tensions, and after 16 years in power, the multiple constituencies in the SNP—from financiers and billionaires seeking super profits from workers' intense exploitation to their academic, media and trade union apparatus allies seeking some of the spoils, to sections of working people seeking improved wages and conditions—are coming apart.

The SNP's financial crisis is bound up with its collapsing membership because growing sections of workers have gone into struggle in defence of wages and services to find cold hostility staring back at them from Holyrood, no less than Westminster.

While Sturgeon presented a more humane persona than Boris Johnson, her policies during the pandemic were no different. Over 17,000 people have died in Scotland from COVID, including over 3,700 elderly people following the release of untested hospital patients into some 200 care homes. The Scottish government recently barred workers in a social care setting from even wearing masks except "when it is recommended."

Throughout the strike wave that has erupted across the UK since last summer, workers on both sides of the border have been given an object lesson in how national divisions in the National Health Service, education and other key struggles have only weakened them in the face of a common enemy—with the SNP pledging over £1 billion in cuts last November on top of previous austerity measures.

Above all, the SNP is marching in lockstep with the UK Tory government and the Labour Party as an open advocate of NATO militarism, lending fulsome support to its war against Russia in Ukraine and appealing for a role in NATO military doctrine for an independent Scotland's armed forces.

Faced with an escalating war and the unprecedented levels of social destruction that will be required to pay for it, workers in Scotland, England and Wales can only defend themselves through a unified struggle alongside their brothers and sisters in Europe and throughout the world for socialism. Not just the SNP, but all the pseudo-left groups that have made up its periphery for decades or who now gravitate around Alba while advocating for a more hardline nationalist agenda are of a pro-imperialist and anti-working-class character.



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