

# Alex Salmond embodied Scottish nationalism's political bankruptcy—Part 2

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## Salmond recalled to save the Scottish National Party

The 2003 Scottish elections were a setback for the SNP. Despite demanding that the election should be turned into a referendum on the Iraq war, the calls were lost amidst the emergence of anti-war parties to the SNP's left. The SNP lost 10 seats, while Tommy Sheridan's SSP and the Greens both picked up six apiece. Both parties supported Scottish independence, while promoting the illusion that the social reforms being abandoned by British capitalism under Blair would somehow be taken forward in Scotland. Sheridan was also a vocal critic of the Iraq war.

Upstaged on the left, former left George Kerevan complained that the SNP's entire devolution project was in danger. To take it forward the SNP needed a confident TV and parliamentary performer able to win corporate support while issuing a steady stream of popular sound bites to the press. Salmond duly put himself forward and was quickly re-elected, appointing Nicola Sturgeon as his deputy.

Salmond immediately proposed a raft of business, financial and infrastructure projects along with Scottish embassies and institutions, while calling for lower corporation tax to compete particularly with the then Irish "Celtic Tiger" economy and its tax rate of 12.5 percent.

By the 2007 elections, the SSP had blown itself up amid a lurid sex scandal around Sheridan. The party split, with Sheridan taking a layer of his supporters into Solidarity Scotland.

The SNP retained its objections to the Iraq War and, backed by business figures such as Tom Farmer of car repair outfit Kwik Fit and Brian Souter of transport giant Stagecoach, campaigned on "a penny for Scotland" for marginal concessions. The possibility for these rested on the Labour Party's 1970s Barnett formula for regional funding, put together as a sop to demands for more oil revenue for Scotland.

With Blair's Labour Party of war ever more despised, Salmond was the main beneficiary, leading the SNP to victory over Labour by one seat while the SSP lost all theirs.

The SNP formed a minority government, with Salmond as first minister and rebranded the Scottish Executive as the Scottish Government. Its pro-capitalist agenda became ever more apparent. Leading financiers, such as Sir Angus Grossart and George Mathewson, were appointed to advisory and managerial positions in the SNP government's initiatives. Salmond also helped promote ex-US President Donald Trump's moves for a golf course near Aberdeen, trampling over planning laws in the process.

## Salmond and the biggest corporate loss in UK history

Salmond said at the time, in full Thatcher mode, "We have a very competitive economic agenda. Many businesspeople have warmed towards the SNP. We need a competitive edge, a competitive advantage—get on with it, get things done, speed up decision making, reduce bureaucracy."

The same year, *Financial Times* business editor John Willman praised the SNP government as "competent and good to do business with."

Within a year, the global financial meltdown triggered by the collapse of New York investment bank Lehman Brothers exposed the risky and fraudulent practices of financial institutions worldwide. Salmond, who had taken to including Scotland in a supposed "arc of prosperity" from Ireland to Iceland and Norway, watched as leading banks were collapsed by unsafe loans based on property speculation.

Scottish based Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) and Halifax Bank of Scotland were both hopelessly saddled with "toxic assets"—loans they would never get back. RBS, briefly the world's largest bank following its reckless takeover of ABN Amro, posted the biggest loss in UK corporate history, losing £24 billion in one year.

Salmond supervised the bailout of the Scottish banks by the UK government on a scale far beyond what an independent Scotland could have afforded. He was reduced to arguing that the headquarters of the bankrupts should remain in Edinburgh.

The financial crisis should have destroyed the SNP, exposing for all time the financial quicksand on which the party's reformist pretensions were based.

Instead the SNP won an outright majority in the 2011 Scottish elections, which can be fully attributed to the accelerating rightward shift of the Labour Party. The Labour government's participation in the Iraq war had made it hated, while its response to the financial crisis was to move towards the brutal austerity measures that would be implemented by its Tory successor.

*The Economist* noted at the time: "You could look at Salmond's cynical, give-away campaign and speculate that he triumphed, not by offering an escape from English overlords in London, but the fantasy of an escape from austerity and the spending cuts that dominate politics down south."

Within weeks the SNP showed where its real class interests lay. Salmond dispatched hundreds of riot police to assist police forces in England in confronting youth riots triggered by the police killing of Mark Duggan. Conservative Scotland Office Minister David Mundell congratulated Salmond, stating, "We need to band together in times of adversity." The SNP's actions set the tone for a decade of austerity measures it implemented in tandem with successive Tory administrations in Westminster.

In 2012, Salmond steered the SNP through dropping its long-standing

opposition to NATO.

### **The 2014 referendum as Scottish nationalism's high water mark**

This was the context for the 2012 agreement signed by Salmond and Tory Prime Minister David Cameron granting the Scottish government powers to hold a referendum on independence, which he calculated would pull the sting from Scottish nationalism's tail.

Backed to the hilt by the pseudo-left, Salmond's SNP put forward a reformist case in the referendum held in 2014 based on expanding profit in what was, so the Scottish government claimed, "one of the wealthiest countries in the world."

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned at the time in a statement "Vote "no" in the Scottish referendum—Fight for a socialist Britain":

The move for separation from the UK is being led by right-wing forces espousing nationalism, whether or not they attempt to dress this up in fake left language. The aim is to transform Scotland into a low tax, cheap labour platform for the benefit of the banks and transnational corporations.

The victims of this will be workers on both sides of the border, who will see a deepening of the ongoing offensive against jobs, wages and conditions that has been waged by all the major parties in both Westminster and Holyrood.

The unity and independence of the working class is the criterion against which every political party and every political initiative must be judged. This is essential under conditions in which the planet is being befouled with nationalist poison.

After pointing to three centuries of shared experiences and struggles of the working class in England, Scotland and Wales, the statement continued:

The advocacy of Scottish independence is a reactionary response to the bankruptcy of the nation state system, which no longer corresponds to the global organisation of economic life. The contradiction between world economy and the nation state had led to two world wars in the 20th century. With global production, this contradiction had reached a new pitch of intensity.

The primary function of a separate Scottish state would be to establish more direct relations with the major banks, corporations and speculators by offering to drive up exploitation, smash up wages and working conditions, destroy or privatise social services and eliminate as far as is possible taxes on corporate wealth.

The only progressive response to the crisis of the nation-state system is to bring an end to all national divisions by adopting the perspective of socialist internationalism.

No other party put forward a principled internationalist line. As a consequence, Salmond came far closer to winning the vote than Cameron had anticipated. But the result was still a clear defeat for the SNP by 55 to 45 percent. Salmond immediately resigned as SNP leader and first minister, making way for his protégé Sturgeon who benefited from a short-lived wave of enthusiasm. The SNP won 50 of 56 seats in the 2015 general election, with Labour reduced to a single seat. Salmond returned

to Westminster as MP for the rural Gordon constituency and served as the SNP's foreign affairs spokesman.

### **Salmond's "wilderness years" and engineered downfall**

In Westminster, Salmond participated in renewed, and popular, calls for Tony Blair to be impeached, complaining in a debate on the Chilcot inquiry into the Iraq war, that it could all happen again: "The overwhelming impression is that a headstrong prime minister could still create a situation where sofa government drove a country into an illegal war."

He was not opposed to the Royal Air Force being unleashed in Iraq in different circumstances. In December 2015, Salmond told Parliament there was a case for "an assisted bombing campaign" by the US or the UK in support of the Kurdish peshmerga forces, "probably our only ally in the region".

Following the loss of his Gordon seat in 2017, as the SNP's popularity began to wane, Salmond caused an outcry when he joined Russian-backed broadcaster RT. The prospect of Salmond's restricted but incisive criticisms of British militarism being applied to preparations for war with Russia put Salmond beyond the pale.

Salmond's career move led Labour peer George Foulkes to accuse him of actions "close to treason" and infuriated his own party. As early as 2015, Sturgeon had insisted the SNP was 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."

Salmond was also seeking to become the voice of elements within the SNP disgruntled at the slow pace of Sturgeon's moves, post Brexit, towards a second independence poll.

MeToo style allegations of sexual misconduct against Salmond soon duly surfaced. He resigned from the SNP in 2018 to pursue a judicial review of the Scottish government's handling of the case against him. He won a Court of Session ruling that actions against him were "unlawful in respect that they were procedurally unfair" and had been "tainted with apparent bias."

Rather than drop matters, the Sturgeon administration escalated, with 22 police officers assigned to the Salmond investigation.

Early in 2019, Salmond was arrested and charged with 14 sex offences, including attempted rape. But despite the major operation against him, in March 2020 Salmond was acquitted on all charges.

Craig Murray was not so fortunate. Already in the crosshairs of the state for his principled defence of Julian Assange, Murray was charged and found guilty of contempt of court for "jigsaw" identification of some of Salmond's anonymised accusers and sentenced to eight months in jail.

### **Nationalism in meltdown**

Salmond subsequently formed Alba, along with a layer of close supporters from the SNP, including former justice minister and one-time 79 Group member, Kenny MacAskill. Alba had only the most marginal of differences with the SNP, but Tommy Sheridan, George Kerevan and Craig Murray all joined—desperate for a vehicle to revive their nationalist aspirations.

Alba instead proved to be an electoral flop, despite offers of pacts with the SNP and all other independence-supporting parties.

In the meantime, facing collapsing membership due to the party's brutal

austerity policies, responsible for tens of thousands of deaths from COVID and saddled with a confusing and unpopular focus on identity issues, the SNP also unravelled spectacularly. Both Sturgeon and then her successor, Humza Yousaf resigned. The party is now led by the same John Swinney who replaced Salmond between 2000 and 2004.

Sturgeon, her husband Peter Murrell and the party treasurer Colin Beattie were arrested and questioned over an ongoing investigation into the party's finances. Murrell has subsequently been charged with embezzlement.

The party crashed at the last general election, losing 39 seats, mostly to the Labour Party, though there are indications of a possible revival already thanks to widespread anger over the Starmer government's right-wing and pro-war policies.

But whatever the SNP's immediate fate, Salmond's long career as its leading representative and its now long record in government is a devastating refutation of its own "progressive" claims and the fatuous assertions of the pseudo-left that Scottish separatism is anti-imperialist and a route to socialism.

The SNP conceit that the social reforms--once conceded to the working class within wealthy imperialist nation states such as the UK and being shredded worldwide--could be maintained within a smaller state such as Scotland, while the regional elite filled their boots on investment based on cheap labour, has been exposed. It is a fraud which serves only the interests of a narrow regional clique of the super-rich and their petty-bourgeois hangers-on.

The time now is not to rally behind any nation or its flag, whether that be the Union Jack or the Saltire. The social and political problems confronting Scottish workers are the same as those facing workers in England, Wales, Europe, America, Russia and China.

The world over, capitalism is plunging humanity into an existential crisis. Billions are thrown into desperate poverty as a tiny oligarchy and massive global corporations monopolise all of society's wealth. Democracy gives way to repression. The NATO war against Russia is followed first by imperialist-backed genocide in Gaza, then war against Lebanon and soon war against Iran. The nationalism generated to legitimise all of this becomes ever viler and more fascistic in character.

As our 2014 statement explained, "In opposition to all forms of nationalism, the SEP calls on workers and youth to renew the great traditions of class solidarity of the British working class on new and higher foundations—in a unified movement for the abolition of capitalism, in Britain, Europe and internationally."



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