

The Scottish Independence Referendum: A Socialist Perspective

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On September 18, 2014, the Scottish people had the opportunity to withdraw from the United Kingdom and become an independent country. The unity of Scotland and England has existed since 1707, so the vote could have broken with three hundred years of history. After a long and bitter campaign, the proposal to leave the UK was defeated by a margin of 55% to 45%. The vote had a profound impact on all of Great Britain and its impact is still being felt.



Virtually the entire Left supported the campaign for Scottish independence. Toward the end, it seemed possible that the "yes" vote would carry. In the aftermath of defeat, many of those on the Left feel cheated, believing that those opposed to independence violated democratic norms. For a socialist who is not a Scottish nationalist, the independence vote raised a series of difficult issues deserving a close examination.

Scotland already has its own parliament. Located in Edinburgh, and called Holyrood after a nearby palace, it has limited power to levy taxes. Holyrood receives most of its funds from the general budget of the UK, as determined by the British Parliament. Polls have consistently shown that public opinion is divided on independence but that two-thirds of those living in Scotland support "devolution max." This would result in the Scottish parliament gaining control over its budget in terms of taxes and expenditures, while determining virtually every matter of domestic policy. Only issues related to the military, foreign policy, and the monarchy would be left in the purview of the UK parliament.

Devo max is so popular in Scotland because of the differences in the political landscape as compared to England. (Wales is somewhere between England and Scotland.) The two parties in the coalition that currently governs the UK are insignificant factors in Scottish politics. Indeed, the Conservatives, or Tories, are despised by the great majority of Scots. There are only two major parties in Scotland, the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party (SNP). The SNP considers itself to be a social democratic party, although it receives generous funding from several powerful Scottish capitalists. The SNP controls the Scottish parliament, and it was its threat to hold a non-binding referendum that forced the coalition government in London to agree to hold a binding referendum.

Most of the Scottish Left advocated a yes vote, arguing that this would mean that Scotland would never be ruled by the Tories and that the SNP could be pressured into implementing progressive reforms. One of the problems with this argument is that the SNP demonstrated during the course of the independence campaign that it had no interest in establishing a truly independent Scotland. The SNP insisted that Scotland would retain its allegiance to the British monarchy. Furthermore, Scotland would retain the pound sterling as its currency, which means that its monetary policy would continue to be determined by the Bank of England. This promise led to the one of the most heated controversies during the campaign, as the leaders of the mainstream British political parties insisted that an independent Scotland could not retain the sterling, and Alex Salmond, the SNP leader and first minister at Holyrood, retorted that an agreement for a common currency could be hammered out after the vote. The SNP also pledged that Scotland would remain within NATO and the European Union, even though it would have had to agree to stringent conditions before being

accepted as a new member.

The UK is a member of NATO, and indeed a trusted ally of the United States. It also maintains a semblance of a nuclear deterrent. A new generation of nuclear subs, armed with Trident missiles carrying nuclear warheads, is about to be built at enormous cost. The only naval base currently capable of hosting nuclear submarines in the UK is at Faslane, a few miles from Glasgow, Scotland's largest city.

Polls show that most Scots would like to rid Faslane of nuclear weapons. One of the few promises made by the SNP during the independence campaign was a pledge to remove the nuclear subs from Faslane. Yet Salmond also rammed through a resolution at a recent SNP national conference reversing the party's previous policy and committing it to support for NATO.

The two policies are directly contradictory. As long as Scotland is part of NATO, either as an independent country or as a region within the UK, U.S. planes and ships armed with nuclear weapons will continue to use Scottish military bases. (This is also true of non-nuclear weapons. Scottish bases will be used as forward posts in the escalating war within Iraq and Syria.) Furthermore, it is highly probable that an independent Scotland would not be permitted to enter NATO unless it agreed to permit the UK to use Faslane as a base for subs carrying Trident missiles for a lengthy transition period until another base in England could be constructed.

In reality, the SNP offered little to persuade voters that an independent Scotland would be significantly different than the status quo. Nevertheless, during the last weeks of the campaign, as the polls showed the result in doubt, there was a noticeable buzz in the air. Illusory or not, many Scots thought the referendum could lead to a significant change. Voter registration soared and signs and buttons on both sides proliferated. Tables were set up by both camps and people were debating the issue in workplaces and pubs. This was the most positive aspect of the independence campaign. Scotland has been hard hit by globalization as factories and shipyards closed and long-term unemployment soared. There was a pervasive sense of despair and hopelessness that undercut any effort to mobilize for positive changes. The independence campaign began to change this, providing the Left with further opportunities to be heard.

Still, the Scottish Left played a small role during the campaign. The Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) created a broad umbrella for progressives to urge a "yes" vote while not being totally subsumed by the SNP, but it failed to advance an alternative vision of an independent Scotland. The RIC produced a sticker urging people to vote for independence in order to "sack the Tories," hardly a radical analysis. Green Party leaders were prominent figures within the RIC and the RIC seems to be acting as a funnel to move activists into the Greens. For socialists, this is a dead end.

In spite of the uninspiring perspective presented by the SNP, and the lack of a radical alternative, the referendum campaign did energize Scottish politics. Even among those voting "no," there was a growing feeling that the UK government had ignored Scotland for too long, and that Scots needed more power to determine their own affairs. In the last weeks of the campaign, the leaders of all three mainstream UK parties, Tories, Labour, and Liberal Democrats, publicly pledged that the Scottish parliament would be granted "extensive" additional powers on domestic issues. These pledges have proven to be problematic in the aftermath of the campaign.

Yet these last-minute concessions were not perceived as sufficient to guarantee the defeat of the referendum. Thus, there was an orchestrated campaign of fear in the last stages of the campaign, with banks and financial institutions threatening to leave an independent Scotland, as the tabloids screamed these threats in front-page headlines. Furthermore, the Westminster government claimed that public sector workers might lose their accumulated pensions if Scotland became

independent. In all likelihood, the corporate threats were bluffs. After all, the SNP was eager to portray itself as pro-business and even promised to cut the corporate profits tax. Nevertheless, corporations are generally risk averse and there was also the concern that an independent Scotland might, in the future, be more likely to accede to public demands for better social services funded by taxes on the rich and the corporations. Most corporate executives opposed independence, and were willing to threaten dire consequences without actually intending to act on these threats.

The SNP was furious at the fear campaign, which did sway some voters. In general, those with the most to lose were the most susceptible to threats. The "yes" vote polled the highest percentages in the poorest districts. Conservative politicians have been targeting social service benefits for austerity cutbacks and the "yes" campaign argument that an independent Scotland would be free from Tory rule resonated in these areas. In middle-class neighborhoods, and where public sector workers with pensions resided, the referendum was defeated by a substantial margin. (In Glasgow, a post-industrial working class city, a narrow majority voted for independence. In Edinburgh, considerably more affluent and the home of the Scottish financial sector, the referendum was defeated by a sizable margin.)

After the vote, many leftists denounced the results, arguing that the corporate threats had violated democratic norms. This is a dubious argument for socialists to make. The last days of the campaign brought to the surface the reality of all elections in a capitalist society. Those candidates supported by the wealthy few always have an enormous, unfair advantage in the form of friendly media, sophisticated advertising, and a large staff of highly paid experts. When all this is not enough, there is always the threat to stop investment and curtail employment.

Rather than complain that the other side is using unfair tactics, we should be pointing out that this kind of crude manipulation of the electoral process will only end when capitalism is abolished and a new and very different society is created.

Furthermore, although the threats were bluffs this time, in the future, when the socialist movement becomes stronger, the threats will be real. Only when the working class has developed confidence in its ability to maintain the economy without relying on capitalist corporations will it be possible to move toward a just society.

The aftermath of the referendum has already brought surprises. Alex Salmond has resigned as leader of the SNP and first minister in the Scottish government, taking responsibility for the defeat of the referendum. His deputy, Nicola Sturgeon, is likely to succeed him. Even before the referendum vote, some of those on the Left were insisting that she was more progressive than Salmond and more willing to challenge the established order. Illusions in liberal politicians die hard.

The mainstream parties in the UK are being pushed to fulfill the pledges made during the campaign to introduce legislation further devolving authority to the Scottish parliament. It seems likely that these concessions will be limited in scope, but the momentum toward devolution max appears to be irresistible. It is also very possible that another independence referendum will be scheduled a few years from now. The question is whether those advocating independence will be more ready to articulate a program of substantive change, not just nebulous nationalist rhetoric.

Within the Scottish political scene, the referendum campaign has greatly strengthened the SNP while giving a further push to the continuing decline of the Labour Party. The Greens and the RIC hope to nudge the SNP slightly leftward, while avoiding any direct challenge to SNP policies. There are plans for a joint slate of candidates for the next election to the Scottish parliament that would involve the Greens and others on the broad Left based on agreement on a minimum program.

The radical Left is small but it can still be influential. Socialists can work within single-issue campaigns to advance a more radical program while consistently pointing to the failures of the SNP and the other mainstream parties. At the same time, there is an urgent need for a socialist organization that can develop a socialist vision through its writings and forums. It may also be possible to put forward candidates independent of the joint slate that stand on an explicitly socialist program and emphasize the necessity of a total break with all of the mainstream parties, including the SNP.

These are stirring times for Scotland, with plenty of pitfalls but also genuine opportunities.

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