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Scotland

Why the left should back independence

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On May 5, 2011, in the fourth elections to the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish National Party (SNP) won an outright majority of seats - under an electoral system devised specifically by the Labour Party to prevent them ever doing so. The current Scottish Parliament was established in 1998, following a referendum in Scotland in 1997. Defence and international issues are still decided by the United Kingdom Parliament at Westminster, but questions such as health and education are decided by the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood.



This earthquake that wiped out Scottish Labour on May 5 in most of its key seats in the (ex) industrial heartlands of the country came about because many voters in Scotland are comparatively happy with the record of the previous minority SNP administration that had left of Labour policies on a series of key questions. Most students in Scotland don't pay tuition fees unlike in the rest of Britain and prescription charges had been abolished on April 1, 2011, just before the election. The SNP also has a record of campaigning against the siting of Britain's Trident nuclear submarine in Scotland.

Further, few people were impressed by the decision of Scottish Labour, with the colourless Iain Gray as leader, to run a vitriolic campaign against independence rather than putting forward any positive policies of its own.

This was combined with the fact that the Tories in Scotland have had very little popular support outside their own bastions since Margaret Thatcher's imposition of the poll tax in the 1980s, while the Liberal Democrats across Britain were punished everywhere for their support for the Conservatives' attacks on working people through deep cuts and extensive privatisations.

At any rate, SNP leader Alex Salmond's night of triumph brings the prospect of Scottish independence closer than it has ever been - with a referendum set to take place within this five-year parliamentary term. Salmond himself has talked about waiting two to three years - but there may now be pressure to move more quickly.

The prospect of independence for Scotland - of a break-up of the British state is a prospect that should be supported by all socialists, as the Scottish Socialist Party's Alan McCombes explains in this article, updated from 2005. "Euros" Terry Conway

Over 150 years ago, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels called on the working class of all countries to unite and fight for a socialist world.

At a time when there were no telephones, no cars, no aeroplanes, no TV and no radio, their internationalist vision represented an extraordinary feat of historical imagination.

In today's world of the internet, satellite TV, high speed air travel, global capitalism and the World Social Forum, the philosophy of socialist internationalism no longer looks like a utopian flight of fantasy.

But what does socialist internationalism mean in practice?

"Imagine there's no countries, I wonder if you can; nothing to kill or die for, a brotherhood of man," sang John Lennon in his celebrated radical anthem.

Such a world may well be built sometime in the distant future by generations who are not yet born. But how do we begin to move from here to there? And how do we apply the principles of socialist internationalism to the 21st century world that we live in?

There are three key questions the Left has to address. We may not reach agreement on the answers, but even to ask the questions would at least be a step forward.

First, does socialist internationalism mean that we are striving to replace capitalist globalisation with socialist globalisation? Are we aiming to build gigantic socialist mega-states? Or should our more immediate goal be to build socialism from below - a socialism that is based on decentralisation, diversity and voluntary co-operation?

Linked to that is a second question. Should socialists be in favour of larger, broader states under capitalism? Is bigger always better? Do large-scale multinational states unify and strengthen the working class or can forced unity from above sometimes aggravate national conflict and resentment?

The third question revolves around the process of change. Will socialism be achieved as the product of a single big bang, a simultaneous, world-wide revolt of the working class and the oppressed? Or, because of differing national conditions and traditions, will social change be more fragmented and disjointed? Will it tend to develop at local and national level first, before spreading outwards?

For those who subscribe to the 'bigger is better' theory of internationalism, multinational states such as the United Kingdom represent historical progress. They say that, whatever the social costs, the Act of Union [\[1\]](#) and the destruction of the Scottish Gaedhltacht after Culloden [\[2\]](#) paved the way for the rise of large-scale capitalism and the emergence of a powerful British working class. Any attempt by Scotland or Wales to break free of the United Kingdom today would be a regressive step.

Logically the same arguments should be applied to the development of the European Union. Those trying to push forward towards a European superstate represent historical progress; while those Swedish and Danish trade unionists and women's organisations who successfully campaigned against the euro were putting their own narrow interests above the greater historical project of internationalism.

Moreover, socialists in Canada and Mexico - and the rest of Latin America too, for that matter - should be advocating union with the United States of America on the grounds that such a continental state would unite hundreds of millions of working people from the Amazonian jungle to the Arctic Circle. After all, a manual worker in Toronto or Guadalajara has more in common with a worker in a Detroit car factory than with a Canadian banker or a Mexican landowner.

Unfortunately, all historical evidence illustrates that forced unity from above tends to inflame national division rather than eradicate it. The European Union, for example, rather than cementing international harmony has become a breeding ground for suspicion and division between nations.

The tides of anti-European resentment now surging through Scottish fishing communities are likely to foreshadow

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more widespread discontent as industrial communities in 'Old Europe' become increasingly pitted against the sweatshop economies of 'New Europe' after enlargement.

Swapping the Union Jack [3] for the Saltire [4] would not rid Scotland of inequality, low pay, pensioner poverty and the other problems inherent in any capitalist economic system. But it would allow normal class politics to develop more naturally than ever before.

Especially since the 1960s nationalism - in its broadest sense - has permeated every pore of Scottish political life. There are times when it has played a progressive role, for example magnifying the intensity of the campaign against the Poll Tax.

More frequently it has acted to deflect attention away from the real source of Scotland's problems. Independence in and of itself won't rid Scotland of these problems, but it would at least clear the way for politics to be fought out on the basis of ideology and class rather than on the basis of nation.

An independent Scotland would also mark an important democratic advance. From the 1980s onward, the Scottish labour and trade union movement spearheaded the battle for devolution.

Whatever the shortcomings of the Scottish Parliament, it has marked an important democratic advance, opening areas such as health, education, transport and the environment to public scrutiny and democratic accountability for the first time ever.

Yet there remains a democratic black hole at the heart of Scottish society. On the big decisions that really matter power is retained at Westminster, an institution which now has a virtually built-in, centre-right majority.

It is Westminster which will decide whether nuclear weapons remain on the Clyde, whether Scottish soldiers are sent to kill and die on behalf of George Bush, whether Thatcher's anti-trade union laws remain on the statute books, whether pensioners should continue to be paid a pittance, whether the rich should continue to pay some of the lowest rates of taxation in the world, whether the minimum wage should be raised from its existing pitifully low level, whether asylum seekers should continue to be locked out of our empty, depopulated land.

A further reason why the Left should back independence is that the break-up of the United Kingdom would weaken capitalism and imperialism internationally. In Scotland, support for the union has always gone hand in hand with support for imperialism. Even today, the official title of the Tory Party in Scotland is the 'Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party'.

The old British Empire has long gone but Britain continues to play a key role on the world stage as the staunchest ally of the US in its drive to conquer the resources of the planet for multinational capitalism.

The departure of Scotland from the United Kingdom would mean more than just the loss of a big chunk of territory. Scotland is a vital cog in the western military machine, with vital nuclear submarine and air bases. More than 80 per cent of all European Union oil reserves are in Scottish waters, while Edinburgh is the fourth finance centre in Europe.

The tearing of the blue out of the Union Jack and the dismantling of the 300 year-old British state would also be a traumatic psychological blow for the forces of capitalism and conservatism in Britain, Europe and the USA. It would be almost as potent in its symbolism as the unravelling of the Soviet Union at the start of the 1990s.

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It is no accident that big business and the conservative right in Scotland are fanatically pro-union. The break-up of the United Kingdom might not mean instant socialism, but it would mean a decisive shift in the balance of ideological and class forces. Political attitudes in Scotland are not necessarily any more left wing than in some of those regions of England which have huge working class concentrations, such as Tyneside, Merseyside or South Yorkshire.

But on a national scale, for close on half a century, the political centre of gravity in Scotland has been more heavily tilted to the Left than in England.

That is reflected, for example, in the fact that the Tories have never won an election in Scotland since the 1950s. Media pundits down south may have proclaimed Old Labour unelectable in the 1980s, but Old Labour beat Thatcher hands down every single time in Scotland.

In 2010 a Westminster Tory / Lib Dem coalition was elected and immediately enacted savage spending cuts while the 2011 Holyrood election saw an SNP government elected on an essentially left of centre social democratic manifesto.

The one legitimate fear expressed by left wing opponents of independence is that the unity of the trade union movement could be torn asunder. But that fear is groundless.

Generations after Ireland won partial independence, a number of British and Irish trade unions continue to organise on both sides of the border. There are many US-based trade unions organised in Canada. There is also close collaboration within the trade-union movement across Scandinavia. In today's world of global corporations, trade union organisation will tend to transcend international borders, though that may well be accompanied by greater decentralisation within trade unions.

Independence is not a synonym for isolationism. In today's globalised economy, it would be no more possible erect a new Hadrian's Wall today than it would have been possible for Robert Burns to hop on board a transatlantic flight at Prestwick Airport. Nor would anyone claim that it's possible build a fully-fledged socialist society in a small country on the edge of Europe. But what we can do is push forward in a socialist direction, blazing a trail which others will then follow.

As a general rule, social and scientific progress is not achieved by waiting until all conditions have ripened to fruition. The Wright brothers didn't wait until the jumbo jet had been invented before flying across the sands of Kitty Hawk. Nor did Fidel Castro and Che Guevara wait until the USA was ready to break with capitalism before leading a revolution in Cuba.

With the victory of a majority SNP government on May 5th 2011 there will be an independence referendum in the next 5 years. That will be preceded with at least a year of wide-ranging constitutional debate on the history of the UK and its relevance today. For the Left, there will no hiding place.

Silence will not be an option. We will have to spell out where we stand. Do we stand with the forces of conservatism on the side of the Union? Or do we strike out courageously on the side of change through participation in the Scottish Independence Convention that could eventually pave the way to a new, socialist Scotland?

[1] In 1707 when the Kingdoms of Scotland and England were unified to form the Kingdom of Great Britain.

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[2] The battle in 1746 at which the Jacobite rebellion was defeated.

[3] The flag of the United Kingdom which was created in 1801 after the incorporation of Ireland into Great Britain. The flag is a combination of the blue cross of St Andrew for Scotland, the red upright cross of St George for England and the red diagonal cross of St Patrick for Ireland.

[4] The flag of Scotland - and of the Scottish National Party.