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Scotland

SSP is split by Sheridan

- News from around the world -

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Tommy Sheridan won the first round of his defamation action against the News of the World (NoTW) in the Scottish Court of Session (Scotland's highest court) on a majority (7- 4) decision of the jury. He was awarded his claimed £200,000 in damages. The NoTW has said it intends to appeal and an investigation by the Lothian and Borders police has begun into allegations of perjury committed during the trial which is expected to last six months or more.

Since then Sheridan has moved quickly to split the SSP. He has called a rally for Sunday September 3 to form a new party in opposition to the SSP. Though he told The Herald of August 20 that this was only one of two options he was considering - the other being to go out of politics and become a barrister - the new party option seems to have won out. Now both the SWP and CWI platforms [1] have met, declared support for his call, and are building for the September 3 rally.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/tommysheridan.jpg>] Tommy Sheridan with Gail Sheridan after the court decision

Socialist Resistance is opposed to this split and supports the United Left and others who are appealing to the members to stay in the SSP and continue to build it. The unity of the Scottish left, on which the SSP was built has to be defended.

The jury majority may have been more than happy to see a reactionary rag like the NoTW given a bloody nose - a sentiment we can all share. But it was not just Tommy Sheridan and the NoTW who were involved in this trial. Others were drawn into it whose integrity has been trashed. There were the 18 witnesses for the NoTW, including 11 members of the SSP EC, who were dragged into court under citation against their will. These SSP members have been branded as liars by their decision to tell the truth to the court. They now face the possibility of perjury charges against them.

Both the SWP and the CWI immediately lauded the decision of the court as a "fantastic victory". No doubt for Sheridan, who must have expected to lose, it was a fantastic victory. But for the Scottish left the whole thing is a disaster. It is also a setback for the British and European left, given the positive influence the SSP has had on the development of the European left since its foundation eight years ago

It was Sheridan's decision to take the NoTW to court, and his repeated refusal to consider any other course of action, which was the cause of this disaster. Once he went down that road, under the circumstances he did, the SSP was certain be dragged in, and the outcome disastrous - whatever the decision the jury had taken.

Mistakes were no doubt made by the EC, who were desperately trying to deal with the crisis Sheridan created, but the responsibility was his. For him to turn reality on its head and blame the EC majority for the crisis is like the arsonist blaming the victim for failing to put out the fire.

Sheridan's unilateralism reflects one of the political factors behind this crisis - the "Great unaccountable Leader" syndrome i.e. the idea that a party is built around a central charismatic leader, who in the end regards his or her self as bigger than the party, and unaccountable to it. It is one of the dangers which small mass parties like the SSP face. There are other such examples around as Alan McCombes points out in his statement in the SSP bulletin issued on August 7.

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Sheridan was originally part of a team. He was the most visible member, the one in the media spotlight, and perceived as the party leader, but he worked with others and depended on others who made contributions which were more hidden even inside the party. The team was under strain before this issue exploded and could not withstand the impact of this crisis.

This crisis was triggered by two articles published in the NoTW in November 2004. These claimed that Sheridan had had extra-marital affairs, engaged in group sex at a Glasgow hotel, and had visited Cupids (a sex club in Manchester) with NoTW journalist Anvar Khan and others.

Eighteen months later, in response to defamation charges filed by Sheridan, the NoTW defended the articles as "substantially true". They cited five women witnesses who claimed to have either had affairs with Sheridan, or had seen him at Cupids or having group sex in the Moat House hotel in Glasgow. The evidence of two of these as witnesses was tainted in that they had sold their stories to the NoTW. This is sordid journalism typical of the NoTW but not proof that they were telling lies.

The NoTW also cited evidence from within the SSP Executive Committee (EC) itself. This concerned statements Sheridan had made, at a meeting of the EC on November 9 2004, called to consider allegations published in the first of the two NoTW articles. These allegations referred only to a "married MSP", but it was clear from the context that it was Sheridan. He admitted to the meeting that he had indeed visited Cupids in Manchester on two occasions. He had told this to two of those present previously.

The minutes put it this way: "Tommy admitted to the meeting that he had in fact visited the club on two occasions, in 1996 and 2002 with close friends. He acknowledged that this had been reckless behaviour and had, with hindsight, been a mistake.

At the same time he made it clear that if he was named in this regard by the NoTW the following Sunday (which was the expectation) he would sue them for defamation, despite the truth of the matter. It was on the basis of the stance - that he would sue over allegations which were none-the-less true -that he was asked to resign as SSP convenor by a unanimous vote of those present. It was his stance which created the depth of crisis in the SSP.

The minutes record the opposition to this which existed in the meeting: "Without exception all contributors disagreed with the strategy of denying the allegations. All felt that this would be the most damaging strategy for the party. The general feeling was that this was a bad situation and that the "least worst" option should be found". Had Sheridan been insisting on suing over false allegations would have been a different matter altogether.

And there were other options he could have taken. He could have ignored the allegations, come clean, or denounced them and they would have blown over. The idea that the only way he could survive politically was to take the NoTW to court was nonsense.

The NoTW obtained a citation that the minutes of this meeting - which they had controversially extracted from the SSP through the powers of the court after Alan McCombes went to prison in an attempt to keep them confidential - be used as evidence at the trial.

Central to the process of splitting the SSP was the open letter Sheridan circulated at the emergency SSP National Council (NC) meeting on May 28 2006, called to discuss the situation and held whilst Alan McCombes was in prison. The letter had been issued to the media prior to the meeting

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In its first paragraph it says: "Today there exists an unsavoury cabal of comrades at the core of the leadership, their hands on the apparatus, who are more interested in pursuing personal vendettas, through vile lies and slander, than conducting the class struggle". It goes on to describe them as: "akin to the dark days of Stalinism"; "McCarthyite" and "effectively acting for the state". The letter was designed to either stampede a majority into supporting him at that meeting, which is what happened, or provide the basis to lead a minority out of the SSP at the end of the meeting or soon after.

At the heart of the open letter was a major political attack on women in the SSP and a dangerous attempt to claim that feminism is alien to class politics. The letter attacked the SSP's 50-50 policy which ensures equal numbers of women and men in elected positions and insisted that: "We are a class-based socialist party. Not a gender-obsessed discussion group. Our socialist principles and class identity define us first. Not our gender or sexual orientation".

Catriona Grant argued in Julia Bindel's article "a win for machismo" in the Guardian of August 8 that the trial was not about class but about gender. There has indeed been a problem of male power relationships involved. With the exception of Gail Sheridan, who achieved celebrity status, all the women involved in the case came off badly.

As Julie Bindel observed all but two of the witnesses on Sheridan's side were men and most of the witnesses against him were women. Sheridan has referred to fellow MSP's Frances Curran, Rosie Kane, and Caroline Leckie as the three witches in a misogynistic attempt to undermine three strong women who disagreed with the reckless way he was threatening the party.

In court Sheridan claimed that there were two separate conspiracies against him. The first by the NoTW, which he said had been out to get him for a long time, the other by a faction inside the SSP leadership who were out to oust him as part of a political take-over. This was nonsense but it neatly diverted the proceedings way from eye-witness accounts of sexual activities, some of which were difficult to rebut, to political conspiracy theories which the jury were hardly in a position to assess. There had certainly been political tension in the SSP, but that is very different to a factional conspiracy. The SSP has had sharp political debates before without factionalism.

The NoTW cited 11 of the 19 SSP members who had been present at the November 9 2004 EC meeting as witnesses at the trial. These were MSPs Rosie Kane, Carolyn Leckie and Colin Fox, plus Allan Green (national secretary) Richie Venton (Glasgow organiser), Alan McCombes, Keith Baldassara (Glasgow councillor), Catriona Grant (EC member), Jo Harvie (editor SSV), Allison Kane (treasurer), and Barbara Scott (minutes secretary).

Remarkably they were able to make these citations because of a fabricated set of minutes of the meeting (as opposed to the official minutes) which had been sent to the NoTW anonymously, presumably by Sheridan or one of his supporters. Who else would fabricate minutes to his advantage? These contained Sheridan's version of proceedings and included an incomplete list of those present. At this stage the SSP had not given the minutes to the court and the names for citation were taken by the NoTW from the fabricated minutes.

These witnesses attended court under the strongest protest and were each asked, under oath, if the (official) minutes were accurate, and if Sheridan had admitted that he had visited Cupids in Manchester. They each confirmed that both were the case. Sheridan promptly denounced them in front of the court as liars and perjurers and the minutes as a fabrication. It was he said "the mother of all stitch-ups". It was not just the NoTW that Sheridan had put on trial - it was the SSP as well.

In fact of the 19 present at the EC meeting of November 9, 15 have confirmed the accuracy of the minutes - the 11 who appeared in court under citation plus four more who were not cited but who have issued a statement since to that effect. The 11 include Allan Green and Colin Fox, neither of whom are members of the United Left and who

strove hard to persuade Sheridan against his defamation case.

The other four EC members appeared as witnesses for Sheridan and said exactly the opposite to the 15. They agreed with him that what he had actually said at the meeting was that he had never visited Cupids, and that the minutes had been fabricated. Only one set of witnesses could be telling the truth -hence the perjury investigation.

The rights and wrongs of these statements and Sheridan's denunciation of the 11 are at the core of this issue and the crisis it has created. Alan McCombes has said of Sheridan's allegations: "this was to accuse the 11 of a monstrous political frame-up including the forgery of documents, a criminal conspiracy to pervert the course of justice, and systematic perjury". Indeed it was. It was, as Richie Venton says in his letter to SSP members, "the mother of all inventions".

The conclusion is inescapable. Tommy Sheridan lied his way through the case and in the course of this repeatedly accused others of lying whilst knowing they were telling the truth. He had expected the entire EC, who had urged him not to take court action, to lie in court in order to back up his case. He then regarded them as traitors because they refused to do so. The message was loud and clear. Sheridan was prepared to go to any lengths to defend the moralistic reputation he had cultivated as a clean living sexually loyal husband and if that meant smashing up the SSP then so be it.

Right up until the momentous NC meeting on May 28 - when everything changed in the SSP, when the framework was set for the trial and the split, and when the SWP and CWI platforms swung behind Sheridan - the validity of the minutes of November 9 2004 had not been in question. Now Sheridan's open letter proposed, on the one hand, that the minutes be handed to the court, and on the other questioned their authenticity - claiming that they were falsified as part of a conspiracy to remove him from office.

This made sense from his point of view. Once he had proposed handing the minutes to the court he had to either drop his defamation action or discredit the minutes. If he accepted that they were true that would be the end of his case. Up till then no one had questioned the minutes, which had been known to those who were at the November 9 meeting for the last year and a half. There had been questions raised as to whether they should have been kept confidential to the EC, but not about their accuracy

As an alternative to the publication of the minutes to SSP members aggregate meetings had been held up and down Scotland in order for EC members to give verbal accounts of the circumstances under which Sheridan was asked to resign. There is plenty of evidence that members were told details of what happened at the November 9 2004 EC meeting at these meetings.

Sheridan also claimed, in his open letter, that he had never read the minutes. This is flatly contradicted by Alan McCombes who insists that the minutes were discussed in a meeting between Allan Green, Colin Fox and Sheridan on May 12 2006 soon after they had been cited by the NoTW. If he had not read them before then it was because he had not bothered to read them. At that meeting, McCombes reveals, it was Sheridan himself who proposed the adoption of the policy of refusing to hand the minutes to the court. His proposal only made sense if he accepted that the minutes were accurate in the first place.

Sheridan, the CWI, the SWP and others tell us that it is scandalous that 11 SSP EC members appeared in court as witnesses for the defence. But what were they supposed to do? If they had refused to appear they would have been arrested and charged with contempt of court. If they refuted the minutes and lied they would risk perjury, which carries a heavy prison sentence. But more than that were they to deny something in court which they knew to be the truth in order to protect Sheridan's image as a respectable married man?

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There are certainly times when socialists would do otherwise, but this would be in situations where what is at stake was the defence of collective action or an issue of principle. This was not an issue of principle. These comrades were being asked to put the interests of one man above the collective interests of the SSP. They were right to say no.

Others have argued that the 11 should have had a bout of collective amnesia. It would have been extremely difficult, however, for 11 people to all say that they could not remember what happened at a meeting as unforgettable as that one. It was held in the glare of publicity, and has had a profound effect on the SSP. It would have been even more difficult for the minutes secretary, who was one of the 11, to have argued that she could not remember what she had recorded.

The dilemma faced by the 11 was understood in advance and was discussed at a meeting of the EC two weeks before the trial started. That meeting voted 17 for, 2 against, and 1 abstention, that if witnesses were asked a direct question in court they should not lie or commit contempt of court. Those who voted for this included Graeme McIver and Jock Penman, who were two of Sheridan's witnesses in court, and Sinead Daly of the CWI. This restated a position which had been taken at the NC itself. No one proposed any alternative.

The scandalous allegations of scab (i.e. crossing class lines) and liar against the EC majority escalated after the trial finished. The Daily Record carried an interview with Sheridan on August 7 with the headline "I'll destroy the scabs who tried to ruin me". There are photos of MSPs Frances Curran, Rosie Kane, Carolyn Leckie and Colin Fox with the word "scab" stamped over them. Frances Curran was not even a witness! Colin Fox issued a statement the same day which called on "all SSP members, regardless of their views during the court case, to immediately disassociate themselves from Tommy Sheridan's scurrilous smear".

This is the same Daily Record which paid Sheridan £30,000 for his story! Sheridan takes action against one section of the capitalist media and then sells his story about it to another. He calls the media "scum" on the one hand and uses it to attack fellow SSP members on the other.

The charge of scab relates to Sheridan's demagogic claims - taken up with relish by the SWP and the CWI - that the trial was a battle between capital and labour in the form of a battle between Tommy Sheridan and Rupert Murdoch. Socialists have to know which side they are on in such a battle, they have repeatedly claimed. It is simplistic nonsense. The idea that socialists are committed, as a matter of principle, to support any case, however reckless, simply because it is between a leading socialist and the likes of Rupert Murdoch, irrespective of the facts or the consequences for others (including other socialists), is preposterous. It reduces politics to crude sloganising.

The treatment of some of the women witnesses by Sheridan was demeaning to say the least. After sacking his legal team in order to bring his own considerable persuasive powers directly on the jury Sheridan cross-examined them himself. Katrine Trolle broke down after three hours in the witness box. She had at first denied that she had had a four-year affair with Sheridan but accepted it was true after being cited to appear in court as a witness for the NoTW. Her story was backed up by evidence from her flatmates and phone records of Sheridan's phone calls to her. Sheridan put it to her in court that she had invented the whole thing to undermine his position in the SSP. Far from seeking publicity, or anything else, she had done all she could to keep out of the whole issue.

In terms of mistakes made by the EC the minutes of the meeting of November 9 2004 should, in our view, never have been taken in the way they were. The various explanations for taking them with the details involved are unconvincing. But in the end it was not the minutes which were the problem for Sheridan. It was what happened at the meeting, and that existed as the truth whether it was minuted or not. Without the minutes EC members could still have been cited to appear and asked to explain what happened at the meeting and exactly why Tommy Sheridan had been asked to resign in the way he was.

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It is also hard to see where the policy of withholding the minutes from court was going to go after the NC on May 28. The policy that the EC was putting to that NC was not sustainable. It was the non-viability of that policy which - although he had proposed it himself - gave Sheridan the opening in that meeting which he seized upon.

The issue is not over, however. Unusually the judge did not put a restraining order on the NoTW to stop them repeating the allegation. They are consequently keeping the story running around lie detector tests which have been taken by some of their witnesses (not the SSP ones) and challenges to Sheridan to take such a test himself. The issue is still selling newspapers for them. Perjury charges at the end of the police investigation are unlikely but possible. Some of the witnesses, SSP and non-SSP, are strongly demanding perjury charges in order to clear their names. The NoTW is appealing on the basis that the outcome of the trial was perverse and are seeking a retrial. Anything could happen.

This damaging split in the SSP does not in any way devalue the importance of building broad pluralist parties of the working class. Such parties are the product of objective political developments - the collapse (or semi-collapse) of the CP's, the march to the right of social democracy, the decline of the Labour left, and the emergence of mass resistance in the form of the global justice and anti-war movements. The need for such parties is not about to go away. What has to be re-emphasised, however, is that genuine pluralism, gender equality, democracy, accountability, including the accountability of the most prominent members is not an options extra for such parties. It has to be built into their culture and their practice if they are to have a long-term role.

What are the prospects for Sheridan's new party, which will be based, presumably, on a slightly different version of the SSP manifesto? Its starting point is not good, based as it is on a wrecking action against the SSP over the refusal of SSP members to lie in court in order to protect his personal reputation. It could well be engulfed in a battle with the NoTW again before it has existed very long where all this will dragged out again. It will be an alliance - and probably called an alliance or a movement rather than a party - between Sheridan and the SWP not unlike the alliance between George Galloway and the SWP which forms the basis of Respect. It would be a huge step back from the democratic unity on which the SSP was constructed.

There is also likely to be sharp difference between its main components. The SWP have regarded Sheridan as a nationalist in the past, but maybe this is something else which will be reassessed.

Then there is the CWI, which will be in an awkward situation in this alliance given their hostile relationship with the SWP in England and Wales and the model they are pushing for their new mass workers party. They regard Sheridan as an ultra-nationalist and a parliamentary reformist. These are all forces which were held together inside the SSP by the existence of the ISM which formed the core of the organisation from its inception.

These developments are a defeat for the radical left in Scotland and internationally. This is a defeat brought about by the determination of one man to put his ego, his desire to create an image of a respectable family man, before the interests of the party he and others had worked for nearly a decade to build.

The only winners from a split in the SSP will be the pro-market forces in Scotland, the nationalists, and the Blairites. Socialist Resistance will stand with the comrades of the SSP in their determination to rebuild their party out of the debris.

Useful links:

[Minutes of the November 9 2004 EC:](#)

[Statement from the United Left on the defamation case:](#)

[All Members Bulletin published after the end of the court case:](#)

[Statement of the SSP EC on Sheridan's new party](#)

[Letter from Richie Venton to SSP trade unionists](#)

[1] Supporters, respectively, of the British Socialist Workers party and the Socialist Party