

# SNP launches National Monologue

**In the Scottish Parliamentary elections held in May this year the Scottish National Party emerged, albeit by the narrowest of margins, as the biggest single faction within the Scottish Parliament. Stan Crooke looks at what has happened since.**

THE SNP now runs a minority administration, albeit with semi-formal support from the two Green MSPs.

SNP leader Alex Salmond and his party wants to build popular support and big business support for independence, in preparation for a referendum to be held in 2010.

Only a minority of the Scottish population currently supports independence for Scotland. Figures vary from one opinion poll to the next, but around one third of the electorate currently supports independence.

The SNP has been able to secure large donations from some of Scotland's captains of industry – £500,000 from Stagecoach co-owner Brian Souter, £100,000 from Kwik-Fit founder Sir Tom Farmer, and £50,000 from Galahad Gold chairman Ian Watson. And in the Holyrood election campaign a hundred Scottish businessmen put their names to a statement in support of the SNP. But still support for the SNP represents a minority current amongst the Scottish capitalist class.

There are three strands to the SNP strategy to build popular support for Scottish independence.

One strand is to implement politically popular measures. In the short term this includes: scrapping bridge tolls, scrapping graduate endowment fees for Scottish students, scrapping prescription charges for the chronically ill, reversing pre-May decisions to close down casualty departments in hospitals in Ayr and Monklands, and introducing a series of pilot schemes for free school meals for the youngest children in primary schools.

A second strand is best described as implementing the “trappings” of independence, in order to emphasise the “otherness” of Scotland from England, the better to win support for a transition to the substance of independence.

The Scottish Executive has been renamed the Scottish Government, ministers have been rebranded as Cabinet Secretaries, and the Royal Coat of Arms has been replaced by the Saltire on official documents. A separate Scottish civil service is to be created, and a Scottish Broadcasting Commission of Enquiry is to be set up.

The Scottish Government has also been promoting a more pro-European agenda, with Salmond prioritising relations with Brussels (and Belfast, as part of a “Celtic axis”) over relations with Westminster.

The third strand is to promote what the SNP has termed the National Conversation. This provides the opportunity for the SNP — in the guise of the Scottish Government — to campaign amongst the general population for independence for Scotland.

In mid-August the SNP government published a launch document entitled “Choosing Scotland's Future: A National Conversation: Independence and Responsibility in the Modern World”. The paper covers three options: status quo, greater devolution, and independence.

THERE is a limit to how long the SNP can implement even selected populist measures. There are already signs of the SNP retreating from manifesto commitments on issues such as ending student debt (which requires far more than scrapping graduate endowment fees) and reversing the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition's attacks on the health service (which, again, requires more than keeping open two casualty departments).

Other policy commitments are guaranteed to prove more controversial. The SNP is committed to freezing the council tax at current levels, for example, which raises the question of how the consequent future shortfall in council spending will be covered. (Not from business rates, as



Alex Salmond

these are going to be cut or scrapped for small businesses.)

In the longer term, the SNP is pledged to replace the council by a flat-rate local income tax. This will benefit the lowest-paid, and will also lead to the highest-paid paying more for local services. But those on an average income will probably also end up paying more — unless local authorities cut jobs and services.

Implementing the “trappings” of independence is unlikely to have more than a limited impact.

The SNP's National Conversation has also been rather less than deafening to date. In the four weeks since the launch of the Conversation, Alex Salmond's statement on the Scottish Government website has attracted just 1,500 comments...

Another major problem faced by the SNP is the limited steps it can take, this side of independence, to demonstrate its pro-capitalist agenda: economic policy remains a reserved power for Westminster. Even so, the SNP rarely misses an opportunity to emphasise its pro-capitalist credentials. Nonetheless it is having a go.

The SNP is committed to “removing or cutting business rates from small businesses”. It has declared its “overarching priority” to be achieving “faster and more sustainable economic growth.” In an independent Scotland an SNP government would slash corporation tax in order to give Scotland “a competitive edge” in the globalised economy.

The SNP's has for long called itself “social democratic”. But that social democracy is broad enough to include a rather less than social democratic wing around Enterprise Minister Jim Mather (who has dismissed increasing income tax rates as “naïve in a knowledge economy”) and Finance Secretary John Swinney (who has promised to cut public sector spending by £1 billion a year), as well as the likes of Mike Russell and Dennis MacLeod. Their 2006 book, *Grasping the Thistle* argued for privatisation of water, trunk roads, the opening up of the public sector to market forces, the abolition of corporation and inheritance taxes, cuts in income tax, and a voucher-based education system.

THERE is little sign of the capitalist class in Scotland swinging round to support an independent Scotland: economic analysts generally remain singularly unconvinced by the SNP's arguments that an independent Scotland would be more profitable than a devolved Scotland.

Of those analysts who do endorse the SNP's pro-independence arguments, most do so from a Thatcherite standpoint: an independent Scotland would no longer be “cushioned” by subsidies from the British state, and would have to break out of its current “dependency culture” in order to compete effectively in the global capitalist market.

The SNP's arguments that income from oil

would sustain an independent Scotland look even more shaky. According to a recent report by the UK Offshore Operators Association, North Sea oil production ran at 2.9 million barrels a day in 2006, compared with 4.5 million barrels a day in 1996. By 2010 output is expected to decline to 2.6 million barrels a day, and to a million barrels a day by 2020. The costs of oil exploration and extraction are also rising rapidly: by 45% over the past nine years, with further increases expected in the years ahead.

THE residual Labour Left, organised in the Scottish Campaign for Socialism, was unable to find even the half a dozen Labour MSPs needed in order to nominate a left challenger to Wendy Alexander after Jack McConnell's resignation as Scottish Labour leader.

“Solidarity”, formed as a breakaway from the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), has little or no existence beyond a website.

The SSP itself is a weakened force, following on from Tommy Sheridan's destructive split and then the SSP's electoral wipe-out in the Holyrood elections. The appeal by the *News of the World* against the verdict in last years libel trial, plus the likelihood of Sheridan facing perjury charges, will impact negatively on the SSP.

**The SNP government knows that if would lose a referendum on independence if one were to be called right now.**

Politically, what is most notable about much of the left in Scotland is the extent to which basic Marxist ideas about class and class struggle have been replaced, albeit to varying degrees, by an amorphous Scottish populism, frequently tainted by hangovers of Stalinism, in which half-spelt-out notions about “pushing the SNP to the left” increasingly displace the fundamental task of the self-organisation of the working class to achieve its own liberation.

According to the editorial in the current issue of *Scottish Left Review* (SLR: a non-party left-forum magazine), for example, the SNP's election victory means that “for social progressives in Scotland, suddenly things seem possible. ... We are now at the beginning of a new game, and there is more to be won by radicals.” Although, warns the SLR, this may prove to be “a mirage”, political demands which were previously a “wish list” may now be transformed into “a practical programme with a chance of success.”

The SLR is correct to point to the essentially conservative (with a small ‘c’) nature of earlier Holyrood administrations. It is equally correct to point out that the SNP government will implement measures politically unacceptable to its predecessors. But what does the SNP's goal of an independent capitalist Scotland, out of which flow its various policy initiatives, have in common with socialist class-struggle politics? And what, for that matter, does the SLR's own “practical programme with a chance of success” amount to?

A rather modest hotch-potch, beginning with “creating an internationally excellent and properly funded research centre for peace and justice in Scotland,” through “ending PFI/PPP by pursuing Public Service Trusts” and “investing significantly more in culture at all levels,” to “establishing Scottish cultural institutes and offices in Reykjavik, Oslo, Stockholm, Copenhagen and Helsinki” and “creating meaningful links with the Nordic countries.”

On the one hand, explains one article in SLR,

Scotland should integrate itself into “the Arc of Prosperity from Ireland through Iceland, to Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland.”

On the other hand, explains another article, Scotland should learn from Cuban government (its ability to mobilise the Cuban people!).

And for the rest of the left?

The verdict of “Solidarity” leader Sheridan on the creation of an SNP government was: “For the first time, Scotland has a nationalist government, and more importantly, a left-of-centre government.”

Both “Solidarity” and the SSP are enthusiastic about the SNP's National Conversation. The SSP “welcomes the coming National Conversation on Scotland's future. Unlike the three London-controlled parties, the SSP is not afraid of a wide-ranging debate, followed by a democratic vote on Scotland's future. We believe Scotland would be economically, politically, culturally and socially better off making our own decisions and standing on our own two feet.”

The SSP statement concludes with what appears to be a call for collaboration by all pro-independence forces: “We believe that the forces in favour of independence — including the SNP, the SSP, the Greens, the Independence Convention, and Independence First — have a major battle on the hands to win the Scottish people decisively to the cause of Scottish independence.” (The SSP, in any case, already backs the cross-party Independence Convention and the “no-party” Independence First campaign.)

BUT neither “Solidarity” nor the SSP point out the essentially undemocratic nature of the SNP's National Conversation and its referendum question.

The SNP government knows that it would lose a referendum on independence if one were to be called right now.

In order to build support for independence, and also to increase the pressure on other parties to vote in favour of staging a referendum in 2010, the SNP government has therefore launched a National Conversation — paid for out of the public spending which the SNP is otherwise committed to reducing — in which the SNP will be doing the bulk of the talking.

The *Choosing Scotland's Future: A National Conversation* document specifically rejects the idea of two referenda on independence — one mandating the Scottish government to negotiate for independence, and a second one to allow the electorate to vote for or against independence on the terms eventually negotiated.

The proposed referendum question entrusts the SNP (Scottish government) to negotiate the terms of independence for Scotland.

And it is the SNP alone which would be entrusted with such negotiations: Labour, the Lib Dems and the Tories are all against independence. Presumably, the SNP's calculation is that if it were to win a “yes” vote in a referendum in 2010 it would romp home to an absolute parliamentary majority in the following year's elections. For this reason alone, I think even socialists who support independence for Scotland should vote “no” in such a referendum: a “yes” vote would be a vote of confidence in the SNP, and a mandate to the SNP for the creation of a capitalist Scotland.)

As an article in the current issue of *Frontline* (originally the magazine of the successor to the “Militant” tendency in the SSP, but now under the name of “an independent Marxist voice in the SSP”) puts it, the current period is “one of the lowest points that the forces of Scottish socialism have been at for a generation.”

But unless the forces of socialism in Scotland think through basic questions about the class nature of the SNP and the SNP government, ridding themselves in the process of their fantasies about the political significance of an independent Scotland, and re-orient to basic class politics, then they are likely to continue to hover around that low point for some time to come.