

September 18, 2014 referendum: Why the international left should support a yes vote for Scottish independence

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On 18 September 2014 one of the most important votes in the history of the British state will take place when people living in Scotland have the opportunity to vote on whether the country should become independent from the rest of Britain.

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The polls currently suggest that those who wish to maintain the Union will probably win a narrow majority, but the reality is that the result is probably too close to call [[1](#)] following two high profile TV debates between the pro-independence Scottish National Party leader (SNP) and Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond, and pro-union Labour MP and former Cabinet member Alistair Darling, leader of the Better Together campaign. [[2](#)]

The campaign around the referendum, particularly that organising for a yes vote, has reshaped politics in Scotland. Mass canvasses including on working class housing estates and packed public meetings have been organised not only by the official Yes campaign dominated by the ruling SNP, but by more radical groups such as the [Radical Independence Campaign](#) and [Women for Independence](#) which have involved huge numbers in every part of Scotland in political discussions – in a context where mass abstention from the political process has been growing across Britain in election after election. Even the Better Together campaign has been forced to emulate these so-called old-fashioned methods, while both sides have used social media to the full as well.

There has been a huge and successful campaign of voter registration. Everyone predicts that the turnout will be much higher than in other elections and the media is forced to concede that the Yes campaign has far more troops on the ground.

Even if the yes campaign is not successful on 18 September there can be no doubt that the dynamic of the campaign and the mass politicisation it has brought about will have an enduring effect and it will certainly not be the end of demands for Scottish independence. On the other hand, if the yes campaign is victorious the left in the rest of Britain will need to ensure that the British state does not act to put further blocks on the right of the people of Scotland to exercise self-determination.

The back story

Scotland has had its own parliament at Holyrood in Edinburgh since 1999, following a referendum in 1979 in which 74% of the population of Scotland voted in favour of this step and 64% voted for the parliament to have tax-raising powers. This achievement was itself the result of a vigorous campaign which brought a new generation of activists into politics. While the SNP was an important part of that campaign, it was by no means hegemonic and the process of fighting for the re-establishment of the Parliament was a central part of what led to the formation of the Scottish Socialist Party .

The fact that the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher had used Scotland as a testing ground for the introduction of their hated poll tax [3], introducing it in 1989, a year earlier than in England and Wales, gave the campaign for the Scottish Parliament important impetus. This was also the issue which saw the long term undermining of the electoral support of the Scottish Conservative Party. [4]

Further financial powers were devolved to the Scottish Parliament in 2012 in an attempt to undercut the yes campaign in the forthcoming independence referendum. Nevertheless key matters, including all foreign policy and overall economic policy, remain the preserve of the Westminster parliament and this reality is a key impetus for the yes campaign. The appeal of more democracy is very potent in practice – again undercutting those who argue that the reason for growing political disinterestedness is apathy rather than disdain for processes which have become so hollowed out by corruption and centralisation.

During the first two terms of the Holyrood parliament in Edinburgh, the Labour Party in Scotland was in government and the Scottish National Party in opposition. In 2007 the SNP won a majority of seats and formed a minority government. In 2011 the SNP won a landslide victory, taking 69 out of 129 seats and forming a majority government.

When the first election took place for Holyrood, Tony Blair and New Labour were in government in Westminster, implementing neo-liberal policies south of the border with fierce determination as well as going to war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Blair was then succeeded as party leader by Gordon Brown who won the 2007 election. In 2010 David Cameron's Conservative and Unionist Party won the Westminster election.

The SNP

The SNP victory of 2011 was a key turning point for a number of reasons. The SNP, founded in 1934, did not win its first MP in Westminster until 1967 but of course the Scottish Parliament was always better terrain for it than Westminster. [5]

The SNP is itself a political formation with a contradictory political programme and practice. At one level using the traditional characterisation that it is a petty bourgeois nationalist party is perfectly accurate – the problem is that the description does not actually tell you much of what you need to know.

In policy terms for example, the party has always been in favour of the retention of the British monarch as head of state in an independent Scotland! Not very radical then? Certainly one of the reasons why historically many, especially Labour members in Scotland referred to the SNP as Tartan Tories.

For 30 years the SNP had a policy of opposition to NATO – an important stance which put it to the left of the other mainstream parties in the country – but at its Perth conference in October 2012 it

reversed this position. This was a turn to the right too far for two of its MSPs who resigned from the party in disgust.

While the SNP currently remains committed to getting rid of Britain's nuclear submarine Trident, currently located at Faslane in the west of Scotland, which is why Scottish CND campaigns for a Yes vote, it is clear that this amongst many other things will remain a contested question in practice after September 18.

There is a general consensus in Scotland against the presence of nuclear weapons in the country because they are immoral, they are incredibly expensive and almost useless in terms of protecting against the most significant threats to national security. [6]

On social matters, where Holyrood has devolved power, the situation is often different from that in the rest of Britain. For example the Scottish government under Salmond has decided to end the right of council tenants to buy their homes, a policy brought in by Thatcher, which has seen the significant depletion of council homes available for rent, as well as acting as a key ideological lever against the idea of collective provision of basic social needs. Scottish students do not pay tuition fees if they study in Scotland – a policy introduced by Scottish Labour but strongly backed by the SNP. Similarly the Scottish government did not introduce charges for personal care for the elderly when they were introduced in the rest of Britain. The SNP abolished prescription charges for medicines in 2011.

But despite these positive moves in a world of neo-liberalism, there are deep limitations to the SNP's approach. Ralph Blake explains [here](#) why we need to be sharply critical of Salmond's economic strategy, explaining amongst other things why an independent Scotland needs an independent currency.

The No campaign's relentless focus on the formal question of whether Scotland needs permission to continue to use the pound sterling has probably backfired on them – with people pointing out that there are many countries that use the currency of another. But there has been less debate – at least south of the border – on what this says about Salmond's overall economic approach and the extent to which he and his party, let alone their friends and supporters in big business, are interested in a real break with the economic orthodoxy of the market. On this question, as on all the others, what will determine the outcome is the extent to which the radical forces that have grown through the yes campaign can maintain a real pressure on the SNP afterwards.

The electoral system under which elections to the Scottish Parliament take place – a combination of 73 constituency seats where MPS are elected on a first past the post basis plus 56 seats allocated to eight regions elected on the D'Hondt [7] system – was deliberately crafted to prevent the SNP ever gaining a majority. The SNP itself, since as far back as 2002 when it adopted its seminal document, [A Constitution for a Free Scotland](#), has campaigned for full proportional representation .

The key election pledge of the SNP in standing in 2011 was that it would demand a referendum on independence. But exit polls made it clear that many who voted for the SNP last May did not do so on the basis of support for independence. Rather, they saw the SNP as being to the left of the other main parties on offer – the Tories, the Lib Dems and also Scottish Labour.

So part of the battle around the referendum has been to convince those same voters that it is only by voting yes that these gains can be protected. The message of those fighting for a Yes vote to the left of the SNP is of course of a different emphasis – that the best conditions to defend and extend the social gains achieved since 1999 are to vote yes – but also to remain mobilised to ensure that these gains can be protected.

Constitutional crisis?

British Prime Minister David Cameron's position would be very seriously undermined by a Yes vote. The state that was established by the Act of Union of 1707, the Kingdom of Great Britain, would hear its death knell at the hands of a democratic vote by the people of Scotland – though independence itself would not take place until March 2016. The Union flag – generally referred to as the Union Jack – would have its future in doubt with the withdrawal of Scotland's Saltire. [8]

The whole constitutional situation would be up for grabs. The first past the post voting system by which Members of Parliament are elected to Westminster is an archaic undemocratic model which hardly exists anywhere else on the globe. Campaigning against this should be a higher priority for the left across Britain.

The fact that other voting systems are used to vote for the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly should give some impetus to this. [9]

The *New Statesman* in February 2014 gave the lie to the argument which, like arguments against proportional representation, are used by some in the Labour Party and trade unions on what can only be seen as a tribal basis – that if Scotland goes independent we are consigned to a Conservative government at Westminster on a permanent basis.

In fact it states “on no occasion since 1945 would independence have changed the identity of the winning party and on only two occasions would it have converted a Labour majority into a hung parliament (1964 and October 1974). Without Scotland, Labour would still have won in 1945 (with a majority of 143, down from 146), in 1966 (75, down from 98), in 1997 (137, down from 179), in 2001 (127, down from 166) and in 2005 (43, down from 66)”.

The fact that the Scottish referendum will be the first time that young people from the age of 16 will be able to vote in Britain must open up a debate about extending the franchise to younger voters in other elections. In a situation where turn out in many elections is low, where the expenses scandal has further undermined confidence in mainstream politicians, this extension of democracy is again something that the left should trumpet.

Over the last several decades we have seen the closing down of democracy in England at the same time as the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. Local government across Britain has been gutted of meaning not only by the cuts imposed by both Labour and Tory governments but also by legislation which limits what local authorities can do – for example in terms of deciding to build council housing.

The development of cabinet control of councils which completely marginalises backbench councillors (those who work for a living) has combined with the introduction of populist measures such as directly elected mayors and Police Commissioners.

The left in Britain has had very little discussion about its position on regional government, partly because of the defensive position we have been in during the period that these issues have begun to be discussed, but also because such democratic issues have tended to be way down the list of priorities.

The Scottish referendum has further stimulated discussion on these questions and, if a yes vote were to be achieved, this would be even more the case. But while it is clear that the left needs to campaign for PR (though this is not uncontroversial – there remarkably are still people who defend first past the post) and for reform of the existing tiers of local government to give them real power,

the debate about whether regional assemblies are something that should be argued for has barely started.

So a Prime Minister in Westminster who presided over this disaster for his class would have some real explaining to do, particularly given the drubbing his party had the European elections at the hands of the right wing anti-European party, UKIP.

The Tories introduction of fixed-term parliaments means that for the first time in British history we know the next General Election will take place in May 2015, which gives Cameron some protection against the prospect of being removed as party leader. However the fact that a prominent Conservative MP has resigned his seat in recent days to fight a parliamentary bye-election as a UKIP candidate means the pressure on him is ratcheting up even before the referendum.

This combines with the fact that an increasing number of Conservative MPs are arguing [\[10\]](#) that if the outcome of the referendum were to be a yes the General Election should be postponed. This would require the repeal of the Fixed-term Parliament Act passed in 2011 which would have to be agreed by both Houses of Parliament in London – not at all a certain prospect. Their argument is that with independence itself not set to take effect until March 2016 you would otherwise have the situation where MPs for the Westminster Parliament would be elected in 2015 but would continue to hold their seats for 4 years beyond independence. This is of particular concern to Conservatives because few if any of them are likely to hold such seats.

Not romantic

Support for a yes vote does not mean romanticising Scotland or the SNP and its programme. There have been forces in Scotland before and after 1707 that have supported British imperialism. The Scottish ruling class in its majority has rallied support for imperialist wars and the Scottish military has fought under the bloody flag of the union in many conflicts.

In terms of the colonisation of Ireland, settlers from Scotland were central to the organised plantation in the seventeenth century – before the Act of Union between Scotland and England – a historical fact which is not irrelevant in understanding the support the vicious and reactionary Orange order still attracts in parts of Scotland today.

It is perfectly possible to be more than a little critical of all or some of Alex Salmond's programme and still believe that this campaign is key for socialists.

Indeed while romanticism and uncritical support for Salmond is a stick used to beat supporters of a yes vote by their opponents both in Scotland and England in fact a rather worse romanticism permeates many of their arguments.

In his speech on Scottish independence in Edinburgh in February 2014 [\[11\]](#), Cameron said he was “a Unionist head, heart and soul”, and acknowledged that the Conservatives were not “currently Scotland's most influential political movement”.

But he ducked speculating about what a Yes vote would mean for Tories either north or south of the border – never mind for his own leadership of the party. Of course the main reason for that is that by contemplating such a defeat he fears to make it more likely – but the fact that the Westminster media gives him an easier time on the question of Scottish independence than in debating the politics of UKIP is also a factor.

New Labour's tribalism

And it is not only the Conservative and Unionist Party who know that a victory for the Scottish independence campaign would be a problem for them – the New Labour leadership is central to the “Better Together” campaign. They are all too aware that independence for Scotland would mean more independence from New Labour – in the sense of relying on working class people’s votes even when you put forward policies and act in practice in a way which consistently kicks those very supporters in the teeth.

It is not surprising then that when Darling says that a yes vote is “as bad for the city as the banking crisis” he is roundly attacked – pointing out his own role in that crisis. Gordon Brown, who had previously kept clear of the Better Together campaign needed to pile in with a speech attacking the so-called pensions’ hole that he claims independence will lead to. Brown has not become more media savvy since he left Downing Street but he is not a member of the Edinburgh elite like Darling. New Labour is aware that key to delivering a no vote in the referendum will be convincing working class voters to stick with the Union – a battle they seem increasingly to be losing.

The Better Together campaign is deeply committed to downplaying the role of British imperialism – claiming that Britain has played a positive role in world politics! Whether it is to prettify the role of British (and Scottish) troops in Iraq and Afghanistan or to pretend that the role of neo-colonialism was driven forward by selfless moral imperatives rather than the greed for profit it is all a lie to defend the Union.

There are sections of the left that support a no vote in the referendum – objectively supporting the union though of course they do not say so. They do not argue on the same lines as the New Labour leadership, but they too tend to imply that there are no divisions within the working class and that support for independence would introduce such alien divisions from the outside. The reality is much more complex than that.

Workers across the globe are divided by racism, by sexism, by homophobia. Working people often believe that some politician of a mainstream party will carry through their promises – despite much evidence to the contrary. Unity of the working class is a dynamic not a static concept – it has to be built and fought for – and it has ebbs and flows.

In terms of the precise relationship between Scotland and England, Allan Armstrong in his [article for Left Unity](#) explains that different trade unions in Britain and Ireland have different models of organising. For example, there is a Scottish version of the National Union of Teachers, the Educational Institute of Scotland, which organises only in Scotland, while UNITE, Britain’s biggest union, organises across the whole of Britain and Ireland.

Workers in the public sector face different situations in different industries – for example health is a devolved responsibility in both Scotland and Wales (and in the North of Ireland). In the private sector – and indeed in the public sector with privatisation – solidarity action across national boundaries is key to defending jobs and conditions in many situations.

Also central to this discourse, and again little noticed in the rest of Britain, is the shift that the Unionist parties have had to make on the question of devolution for Scotland. When the campaign to create the Scottish Parliament was in full swing the Tories were opposed to any form of devolution and the majority of New Labour in Scotland was extremely mealy mouthed.

But over time they have been forced to concede more. The Scotland Act of 2012 gave Holyrood more revenue raising powers. Unionist politicians of all hues have dangled a new package of

devolution [12] in front of the people of Scotland to persuade them there is no need to vote for independence.

This is what David Cameron said when he addressed the Scottish Conservative Party Conference in March 2014:

“Let me be absolutely clear: a vote for No is not a vote for ‘no change’. We are committed to making devolution work better still, not because we want to give Alex Salmond a consolation prize if Scotland votes No but because it is the right thing to do.

“Giving the Scottish Parliament greater responsibility for raising more of the money it spends, that’s what [Scottish party leader] Ruth Davidson believes and I believe it too.” [13]

Davidson has subsequently put more flesh on these bones [here](#). But as we approach the vote it seems increasingly that such pleas are falling on deaf ears.

But a yes vote will awaken expectations amongst the many who make their mark believing that Salmond can be trusted as well as those that do not. That’s one of the reasons why the British elite are throwing so much time and money into campaigning to defend the Union.

And as Ralph Blake argues [14], a victory for the yes campaign can open up a dynamic political process in Scotland around a campaign for a constituent assembly – one of the ways in which discussions in Scotland relate to debates in Catalonia. Socialists across the world have nothing to lose and much to gain by aligning ourselves with such a dynamic movement for radical change.

Terry Conway, September 4 2014

P.S.

* From International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] [BBC](#).

[2] Darling is a Labour Member of Parliament at the Westminster Parliament for a Scottish constituency, Edinburgh South West. He has held many positions in the British Cabinet including Chancellor of the Exchequer.

[3] Formally called the Community Charge – an extremely regressive tax imposed on every adult replacing a tax based on the value of property.

[4] Only one Conservative MP was returned to Westminster for a Scottish constituency at the general elections of 2001, 2005 and 2010. In the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Conservatives currently hold 15 of the 129 seats.

[5] Wikipedia entry [Scottish National Party](#).

[6] For more arguments see [here](#).

[7] For more explanation see [here](#).

[8] The flag of Scotland is known as the Saltire and is currently part of the Union Jack, forming the white diagonal cross on a blue background, see [here](#).

[9] The Welsh Assembly came into being at the same time as the Scottish Parliament but has far fewer powers. Today Plaid Cymru – more radical than its Scottish counterpart – is the majority party in Wales and supports the yes campaign in Scotland.

[10] See [here](#).

[11] [New statement](#).

[12] referred to as devo max

[13] [Spectator blog](#).

[14] See on ESSF (article 33034), [September 18 referendum in Scotland: Vote Yes and campaign for a Constituent Assembly](#).