

September 18 referendum in Scotland: How to explain the surge in support for independence?

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In Scotland, a remarkable popular movement, the campaign for independence, is heading towards the September 18 referendum on whether the country will remain part of the United Kingdom. To better understand the surge in support for Scottish independence over the last few weeks of the campaign, *Green Left Weekly* and *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* European correspondent Dick Nichols spoke with Alister Black, editor of the Scottish independent Marxist review *Frontline*. Black, a member of the Scottish Socialist Party, is active in the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC), a left platform within the Yes Scotland movement.

Dick Nichols: The latest polls for the referendum show the “No” case still ahead, but with the gap with the “Yes” vote narrowing and the number of “Don’t knows” falling. Yet early August mass canvassing by the Radical Independence Campaign, with a very large sample of over 18,000, produced very different numbers—Yes leading No by 42% to 28%, but with 30% “Don’t knows”. A September 7 Sunday Times poll had the pro-independence vote winning 51% to 49%. What’ is your reading of the situation as voting day approaches?

Alister Black: The gap is clearly narrowing and each day we seem to be closer to a Yes vote. The Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) has been campaigning in the working-class areas, where support for Yes is strongest. We have been busy signing up hundreds for the voters’ roll. Over the last few weeks we have seen enormous enthusiasm for Yes emerge among the poorest and most excluded groups, who can see the opportunity for a more socially just society emerging from an independent Scotland.

Many Scots are beginning to feel a sense of agency and control over the future of their society for the first time, and it is a contagious feeling.

After the Sunday Times poll showing the Yes case winning the No campaign, Better Together (BT), seem to be in a kind of paralysed shock. The offer of more powers to Scotland in the case of a No victory, offered by former Labour prime minister Gordon Brown on September 8, is too little, too late and largely an attempt to shore up the Labour Party No vote.

I think for most people it just shows that sticking up for yourself gets results, and we might as well take all the powers. It’s still very close but there are good reasons for the optimism in the Yes Scotland camp.

Just four weeks ago, the YouGov poll had the No case leading by 61% to 39% (after the

undecided were excluded). Why has the gap between the two sides closed so much? If the Yes case eventually wins, what will have been the main reasons?

I think that what we have seen has been a combination of two things. First, the negative campaign run by Better Together has been challenged and exposed over the last few months. BT actually called this “project fear”! But their scaremongering about jobs, pensions, currency etc. has been comprehensively rebutted.

The turning point was probably the last leaders’ debate (on August 25) when Alistair Darling, BT leader, senior Labour Party politician and former Chancellor of the Exchequer, conceded that Scotland could continue to use sterling as its currency. He also had little to offer when asked about new powers for Scotland in the event of a No vote.

Second, the Yes campaign has been a genuine mass grassroots campaign, reaching far beyond the governing Scottish National Party (SNP) and diehard nationalists. This campaign has mobilised in every community and has comprehensively won the argument on the streets and doorsteps. It is this grassroots activism that has been able to counter the media, which BT have relied on to put its message over.

The most powerful arguments have been around social justice, defending the National Health Service (NHS) and scrapping Trident nuclear weapons. Ethnic and historical issues have been almost entirely absent from the campaign.

Alistair Darling was said to have won the first leaders’ debate, but first minister Alex Salmond of the SNP the second. Why the turnaround?

In the second debate Salmond led on questions of social justice, defence of the NHS and scrapping Trident nuclear weapons. When Darling was challenged on what new job-creating powers Scotland would have in the event of a No vote he could only put forward the current scheme in which the unemployed work for free in shops, also known as slave labour. He also conceded crucial points on the currency. The “project fear” case dissolved before our eyes.

The voting age in the referendum is 16 and a recent TubeMogul survey suggests that a majority of voters between 16 and 19 will favour the No case (by 57% to 43%). Is this an accurate reflection of the attitudes of the young, and, if so, why?

Young people have only known a time in which neoliberalism is the norm and they have been told this is the only way things can be. I think the independence campaign is beginning to show them that you can challenge power and you can present an optimistic vision of a better society. I believe that young people will begin to move in bigger numbers towards Yes in the last part of the campaign.

During my recent holidays in Scotland, I was struck by how much the referendum campaign seemed to have politicised people from all “walks of life”. How deep has its impact been?

I think what we have seen is a democratic spirit in action. The campaign has seen an unprecedented outbreak of discussion and debate around every aspect of life and that has been very inspiring for thousands, many taking part in politics for the first time. Everyone is talking about politics, about the future of their society, about their community when you go to the shops, when you go to work, when you walk down the street or read social media.

How decisive in winning will be the sentiment that, given North Sea oil, Scots don’t have to be like

England, dominated by neoliberalism, but can be like the Scandinavian countries, especially Norway, affording a decent welfare system and preserving the NHS from neoliberal “reform”?

It is certainly a key element and appeals to those who would like to see a more socialist or social-democratic society. Of course there are problems with this—the Scandinavian countries have not been immune from austerity and privatisation. Additionally, it is important to develop new, greener forms of energy, such as wind and wave power—both in plentiful supply in Scotland.

The left would also argue for the nationalisation of oil so that profits can be used for the benefit of all. The idea has also been raised that any new constitution should state that the natural resources of Scotland should be owned by the people.

In what parts of Scottish society and in what regions of the country is independence sentiment strongest? Why?

The campaign has been strongest among those who have suffered most from the last few decades of Thatcherism, the triumph of neoliberalism and the austerity of the last period. In working-class communities, where people have bitter memories of the miners’ strike and the poll tax, support for independence has been high, and we have also seen thousands registering to vote. There are communities like this across Scotland. The sense is that the most alienated and disenfranchised sections of society are about to make their voices heard, and won’t be staying silent in future.

How does Scottish big business line up in the independence debate? What truth is there to the scare stories that Scottish banking and finance, especially the bailed-out Royal Bank of Scotland, will jump ship to London in case of a Yes win?

At the end of the day big business will behave in the same way they have always done. If they can make more money by moving, then they will move. The truth is that no one is exactly lining up to take over the risks associated with Royal Bank of Scotland and the rest. There are a lot of people employed in finance in Scotland, particularly in Edinburgh, and we will need to look at how to reduce reliance on this sector and shift jobs to more socially productive areas.

This week Michelle Mone, the boss of a clothing firm threatened to move her firm out of Scotland in the event of a Yes vote, what she didn’t say was that she has already moved 1200 jobs to China, leaving just a handful in Scotland.

What has been the attitude of the Scottish trade unions, and their peak body, the Scottish Trade Union Congress?

The union leaders for the most part have done their best to stay “neutral” in the campaign, which translates as following Labour Party orders not to back independence. The unions held a series of consultations but have tended to either back the Labour Party position or say nothing. There have been exceptions such as postal workers in Edinburgh, and the rail workers’ union, the Rail Maritime and Transport Union, whose members voted this week to back independence.

In 1968, famous Scottish miners’ leader Mick McGahey said: “Scottish workers have more in common with London dockers, Durham miners and Sheffield engineers than they have ever had with Scottish barons and landlord traitors.” How much has that sentiment changed, and why? Does the growing working-class support for an independent Scotland have any reflection inside the Labour Party?

Mick McGahey was quite right. Furthermore, Scottish workers have more in common with workers in Ireland, France or India than their bosses. The idea that supporting Scottish statehood runs

counter to international solidarity is entirely false.

The recent poll that saw Yes go ahead for the first time saw the biggest shift was of Labour voters moving to Yes, the number of Labour voters backing independence has doubled in a month and nearly a third of all Labour voters are now backing Yes. Individual labour councillors and former officials have also moved.

There is also a small but influential “Labour for Independence” group. In reality, independence could be good for the Scottish Labour Party if it shakes off the ties to the Westminster party that is so tainted with war and austerity.

The Radical Independence Campaign has played an important role in mobilising activists to build the Yes campaign. How do you see the contribution of RIC? If the Yes case wins, how much will RIC have been responsible?

The RIC is just one aspect of the campaign; there are many local groups and important sections of the campaign such as Women for Independence (one of whose principal organisers is former SSP Member of the Scottish Parliament Carolyn Leckie) and the artists’ group, the National Collective.

However, the RIC has succeeded in mobilising many on the left and also many young people attracted by our political arguments for independence. The RIC has brought plenty of energy and has conducted mass canvassing in working-class areas that is too often forgotten. Above all the RIC has brought forward political arguments for the kind of Scotland we want to see.

What have been the main features of the RIC campaign?

The RIC is a political project as well as a campaigning group, so it has always made political debate and discussion the centre of its work. The RIC has held two very successful conferences, with around 900 attending each time, a huge number for the Scottish left. These featured debate on our vision for an independent Scotland and the necessity of putting forward a radical perspective.

The RIC has mobilised thousands across the country and set up branches, not just in the big cities like Glasgow and Edinburgh, but in the smaller towns and rural areas as well. In Edinburgh we have been meeting twice a month and often have big turnouts.

We have had the strange experience (for the left) of turning people away from meetings due to lack of space, and raising money faster than we can spend it!

Anyone is welcome to put forward a topic for political discussion and we have had a wide variety of topics including anti-racism, feminism, secularism, Palestine, environmentalism and many more topics. The RIC has undertaken its own campaigning but also worked with the official Yes campaign.

Over the last year, two books have been published that put the radical case for independence: Yes: the Radical Case for Independence, by James Foley and Pete Ramand, and In Place of Fear 2: a Socialist Program for an Independent Scotland, by former left Labour then SNP MP Jim Sillars. Both books challenge the mainstream Yes case that independence means “change, but not too much”. What impact have they had?

We have seen an explosion of new books examining different aspects of the independence debate, and the left has been to the fore. I think the battle for ideas has been key: neither of these books have mass readerships but they have helped arm activists with ideas to take to the doorsteps.

There are conservative and progressive arguments for Scottish independence. For example, Alex

Salmond has tried to neutralise two points of attack by the No case—the currency issue and the monarchy—by saying Scotland will retain both pound sterling and Queen Elizabeth. It will also stay in NATO. How has the RIC handled these issues?

The RIC has of course been critical of these positions. Regarding the monarchy we argue for a republic—there will be much work to do after the vote around this question. Australian readers know better than most the implications of crown powers and their ability to remove elected leaders, as happened to Gough Whitlam.

On the issue of the currency, the left has largely argued for a new currency rather than the pound or the euro – without our own central bank we will have no control over interest rates etc. Colin Fox, co-convenor of the SSP and a member of the Yes Scotland advisory board, broke ranks to call for a separate currency.

Salmond (like Catalan premier Artur Mas) also presents an independent Scotland as a good citizen of the European Union and decries both Tory and United Kingdom Independence Party euroscepticism. How has the RIC addressed the issue of the European Union?

Europe is a difficult issue. Euroscepticism has become the ground of the far right and the UKIP. One of the problems faced by the independence campaign has been workers from Europe rejecting Yes because they are fearful of their right to stay if Scotland is not allowed into the EU, so the narrative from Yes supporters has tended to focus on the likelihood of admittance to the EU.

But of course there are enormous problems with the EU and EU membership limits our ability to undertake progressive social change – the EU would not allow us to nationalise oil, communications or electricity, it would limit our budget spending. The general approach has been to say, stay in the EU but challenge it and call for a social Europe.

One of the strongest points of the Yes campaign is the savings to be gained from the removal of Trident nuclear submarines from their Scottish bases. However, what debate is there over defence policy for an independent Scotland?

The left has been critical of the SNP decision to reverse its policy of leaving NATO. This decision saw two SNP MSPs resign from the party, and both of those have participated in RIC and SSP meetings around Scotland.

What political scenario would a Yes victory open up in Scotland? In the UK?

Make no mistake, a Yes vote would be a political earthquake in both Scotland and the UK, beginning with the two-year period before we conclude negotiations and officially leave. For Scotland we have a chance to build a modern, socially just society built on the principles of solidarity that uses its wealth to tackle poverty.

None of this would be given to us and would require the democratic involvement of all of those who have been campaigning for Yes over the last two years. In the UK we hope that Scotland will set a positive example and will demonstrate that it is possible to change things.

What are the likely repercussions, in Scotland and the UK, in the event of a No win?

The No campaign has been busy making all sorts of promises of new powers for Scotland in the event of a No vote, but in reality they would look to cut spending and force an austerity agenda, which the Tory right and the UKIP have already demanded. The position of British PM David Cameron would be strengthened and we could see an earlier UK general election.

What lessons, if any, would a Yes victory have for the campaign for Catalonia's right to decide?

It can only strengthen the demands for Catalonians to vote on statehood. The key lesson is the need to build a strong and diverse grassroots movement.

The RIC involves the Green Party, the Scottish Socialist Party, other left organisations and many unaffiliated activists. What do you think the experience of the RIC will mean for rebuilding the Scottish left?

The RIC experience has been a generally positive one, we have seen activists working together in a positive way and building trust. Regardless of the vote

I hope we will build on this to bring together a strong force for the left in Scottish politics.

That will be a process that might be difficult, but is achievable in some form. However, any new formation needs to learn the lessons of the SSP—to take women's issues seriously. Crucially, it needs to be based on the vibrant, grassroots activists thrown up by the Yes movement and with a strong community involvement, and not just be a flag of convenience for those looking for a seat in parliament.

P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/4051>