

United Kingdom: The contradictions underlying Brexit and Scottish independence

Tuesday 8 October 2019, by [AMSTRONG Allan](#) (Date first published: 12 September 2019).

To date articles in *Conter* addressing Brexit have concentrated more on the neo-liberal opposition, and those on the Left perceived to be tail-ending this section of the British ruling class, writes Allan Armstrong of the Radical Independence Campaign. [1]

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There has been no real analysis of the aims of the hard right and national populist advocates of Brexit, whether the Boris Johnson-led Tories, or the Nigel Farage-led UKIP and now his Brexit Party. Brexit has not been adequately placed in the context of the global rise of right national populism, highlighted by Donald Trump's 'Brexit, plus, plus, plus', US presidential electoral victory in November 2016[2]. These people are still seen by some on the Left as political outsiders, despite now having their hands on the US state's anti-democratic presidential powers and the UK state's anti-democratic crown powers. Nor have the machinations of such 'left' Brexit union leaders as UNITE's Len McCluskey been addressed [3].

The Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) has formed an important arena for discussing such issues [4]. Indeed RIC's Scottish internationalism is highlighted on its banner - 'Another Scotland is Possible; Another Europe is Possible; Another World is Possible'. Hopefully, the 26 October 2019 RIC conference in Glasgow will extend this opportunity for discussion related to the situation we now face. Understanding the political forces, which the Left is up against, is essential, not only in the UK and wider world, but for us in Scotland, when we consider the future for Scottish independence.

For the political terrain has very much changed since 2014. The assumption underlying the 'Yes' campaign was that independence would be introduced in a Scotland, which along with the rest of the UK (rUK), remained part of the EU. This would ensure the continuation of existing economic and social links between Scotland and particularly England. A key consequence of this understanding was that continued EU membership meant there would be no physical border between England and Scotland. This is why one of the central aims of 'Project Fear' was to say that Scottish independence would be incompatible with continued membership of the EU.

Hard border in Ireland

Today, following the 2016 Brexit vote, and May's and Johnson's push for a hard Brexit, it is quite clear that the UK's separation from the EU would involve a hard border between the UK and the 26 county Republic of Ireland. The opposition of a section of the hard-right Tories, the DUP and the Brexit Party to this border being in the Irish/Celtic Sea, would lead to the re-erection of customs and police posts between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. Like Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, Scotland and England have a land border. If the UK was to leave the EU, then any successful attempt to win Scottish independence would necessitate customs and police posts, unless Scotland was to follow the same economic and social path as the rUK.

If the prospect of the re-imposition of a hard border in Ireland has caused consternation, then the prospect of Scottish independence with the rUK outside the EU would lead to considerable concerns in the Scottish/English Borders. Towns like Carlisle and Berwick have significant Scottish economic hinterlands. And, of course, there are considerably wider economic and social links and implications too. Therefore, it is easy to see why the SNP leadership has put the UK's continued membership of the EU, and hence opposition to Brexit, at the centre of its current politics.

But the SNP leadership's neo-liberal internationalism comes at a considerable political cost. The EU is not a state – it has no army, police force or local bureaucracy. All of these things are provided by the member states. And this highlights the real nature of the EU. It is a treaty alliance of existing states. And as Scotland and Catalunya have recently found to their cost, the high sounding, political principals proclaimed by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, can be ignored by member states. The UK and Spain did so when they conducted their 'dirty wars' in Northern Ireland/Ireland and in Euskadi. The UK and several East European member states have pursued vindictive policies against the longstanding Gypsy and Traveller minorities. And despite the formidable barriers to asylum seekers and other migrants, represented by the Schengen Agreement (but which are still not high enough for the Brexiteers), right populist governments in Eastern Europe and in Italy have pursued particularly vicious policies towards those migrants who have made it in. The 'hostile environment' encouraged by successive Eurosceptic UK governments, pledged to EU exemptions, is hardly much better.

Sovereignitists?

There has been Scottish nationalist opposition to the SNP government prioritising an anti-Brexit strategy. Some have termed this as coming from the "sovereignitists". This is a very ambiguous term, since in a key sense we are all sovereignitists. The British Right uphold the sovereignty of the Crown-in-Westminster. The hard right Tory government is currently trying to stretch this to the limits of the crown powers to impose a very hard or a 'No Deal' Brexit. Liberals (in all the mainstream parties) uphold the sovereignty of parliament, i.e. Westminster. But they are finding, in their opposition to Brexit or a hard Brexit, that this does not form the basis of the UK's unwritten constitution. The Queen upholds Johnson's hard right executive, not the 'liberal' Westminster legislature. Right nationalists uphold the sovereignty of their national state, making this a higher principle than any other form of sovereignty. This can lead to support for one party, personal, or military dictatorships. Radicals support the sovereignty of the people above all these other forms of sovereignty.

The revolutionary left has upheld the idea of the sovereignty of the commune (dating back to the Paris Commune of 1870), or of soviets (which existed in the infant Russian Soviet Republic up to 1921, before this gave way to one party sovereignty). However, in the absence of any longer lasting

communes or soviets, the self-proclaimed evolutionary left has either opted for abstract propagandism (making propaganda for these two types of sovereignty), or decided to support right, liberal, national or radical versions of sovereignty in the meantime, hoping to use these constitutional frameworks to build their forces for the future.

In the confused circumstances prevailing at present, the actual political nature of those who have been labelled Scottish 'sovereignists' is not yet clear. However, they seem to be best characterised as aspiring national sovereignists. Some support opposition to Brexit, not on any internationalist grounds, but because this highlights a Scottish difference with the English. They often tend to see this situation as lying in deep-seated ethnic/cultural differences rather than in contingent political terms. This opens up the possibility of ditching the civic Scottish national politics, which has characterised the overwhelming majority of the 'Yes' movement, and of mounting an ethnic Scottish nationalist movement. Groups openly advocating such a stance, such as Soil nan Gaidheal, and others flirting with such ideas, such as Scottish Resistance, have remained marginal – so far.

English nationalism

However, the rampant right English nationalism of the campaign which the Tory hard right intend to mount against the EU, and against any national democratic challenges from Scotland, Ireland and Wales, will create the political conditions for a more ethnic Scottish nationalist response. One indication of this has been the letters to the Scottish press suggesting restricting the franchise in any future Scottish independence referendum. In changing political circumstances, such ethnic nationalism could draw in more significant forces, such as Stuart Campbell's right nationalist Wings over Scotland. And what would the consequences of a post-trial Alex Salmond adding his support to such forces, backed by Putin's Russia Today [5]? Such a scenario could set back the Scottish independence movement for some time. For, whatever the Left thinks about Salmond's links with the Royal Bank of Scotland, and his earlier support for a hyper neo-liberal 'Celtic Lion', he was central to the move of the SNP from a more ethnic nationalist to a civic national party. This very much benefitted the IndyRef1 campaign in 2014, and his abandonment of this principle would represent a real setback.

The atmosphere on the popularly based 'All Under One Banner' marches could also change. To date they have been very open events. The overwhelming majority of those carrying saltires [the Scottish flag of St Andrew, white diagonal cross on a blue background -SR] have welcomed red, Catalan, Basque, Irish, Welsh, English and many other kinds of flags on the marches. A rising pro-Brexit English nationalism could lead though to 'All Under One Banner' being less a campaign under the Scottish democratic banner of independence, and more a campaign under the ethnic Scottish banner of 'All Under One Saltire'. The SNP leadership's current dilemma of being unable to obtain a credible UK constitutional opening for Scottish independence, will reinforce the frustrations of many rank and file SNP members, and others in the independence movement.

Furthermore, the SNP, like other neo-liberal supporters of Remain, are unable to adopt a critical stance towards the EU's own neo-liberalism, highlighted by the Troika's draconian imposition of austerity upon Greece. Nor can they challenge the anti-democratic, existing state nature of the EU treaty alliance, highlighted by the jailing of Catalan republicans in Spain. Thus, the SNP leadership leaves the wider political initiative to powerful EU member states like Germany and France, whilst still being unable to do anything about Catalunya, the victim of another unionist and imperialist monarchist state.

Reactionary unionism

Nor do the SNP leadership have the politics to confront a reactionary British unionism, which would mean a fundamental challenge to the UK state. They are still desperately looking for liberal unionists to provide them with a constitutional road to IndyRef2 [a future referendum for Scottish Independence -SR]. But the days of majority British ruling class support for liberal unionist constitutional solutions have gone. And Labour Party leaders Corbyn and McDonnell's suggested opening up of such a path is based on electoral opportunism, not on any principle of democratic self-determination. The British ruling class could easily blow this prospect out the water, assisted by the crown powers and conservative unionist Scottish Labour.

The Brexiters, though, want to leave the EU in order to further reinforce an already very undemocratic UK state. The roots of the current constitutional mayhem go back to the post 2008 crisis of neo-liberal hegemony and the mounting challenges to New Labour's liberal unionist, Irish 'Peace Process' and the Devolution-all-round settlement of the late 1990s [6]. In the face of so many challenges, the hard right Brexiters are determined to defend the interests of the British ruling class in today's turbulent crisis-ridden world.

The Brexiters also want to introduce a 'gastarbeiter' ['guest worker'- SR] system of migration controls, which would extend the draconian 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts to EU citizens living and working here. This would end the levels of pay, working conditions, residency rights, social welfare benefits and trade union organisation, which over 2 million EU citizens living in the UK currently share with the rest of us. And this division would go on to undermine the position of most working class UK subjects too. We are to be locked into a low wage, lousy conditions, offshore British economy, with reduced worker, consumer, environmental and social rights.

The Tory neo-liberals' 'hostile environment' against migrants was just a foretaste of a possible right national populist future. The deaths of Jo Cox MP, Arel Jozwik and Dagmara Przybysz were not the desired outcome of the mainstream Brexiters but were nevertheless a direct consequence of the racist politics they pursued. You only have to look to the links between reactionary unionist and hard right, Brexit-supporting, DUP and the hard-core loyalists in Northern Ireland, to see how such a symbiotic state/non-state relationship can develop.

Whilst larger sections of the British ruling class, have been won over to increasingly hard Brexit options, the notion of a 'No Deal' Brexit still seems to be against their interests. Indeed, liberal opposition is being expressed within the very undemocratic institutions of the UK state which have also been utilised by the Brexiteers. Therefore, beyond the Privy Council, resistance has been found at Westminster and the House of Lords, and amongst senior judges and civil servants. What on earth gives Johnson and the hard right Brexiters the confidence to think they can succeed against such opposition?

Those who are looking to the City to put a stop to a No Deal Brexit, are likely to be disappointed. Both the more pro-EU and the pro-Brexit financiers have resorted to hedge funds to cover themselves and make a fortune in the event a 'No Deal' Brexit. So, the hard-right Tory government has relatively little to fear from this quarter. At least £3B has already been wagered on a 'No Deal' Brexit [7]. Home Secretary Sajid Javid's planned corporate and high earners' tax reductions will blunt the opposition of some of the less ardent neo-liberal Remainer and soft Brexiter members of the British ruling class.

Politically though, [current UK government figures] Johnson, Rees-Mogg, Dominic Cummings et al are betting on Trump, the most powerful man, in the most powerful state in the world, to help them promote 'America First'/Britain Second' global hegemony. If leading sections of the British ruling

class feel they no longer have sufficient political clout on the EU top table, then many are still quite prepared to accept a political status for the UK, somewhere lower than that of Alaska and Puerto Rico in their dealings with Trump. They see this as a price worth paying to maintain the institutions, privilege and pomp inherited from the British Empire.

Democratic internationalism

There are only two politico-economic options for the UK at present – either in or out of the EU. If the Left were to advocate its own Scottish national sovereigntist policy, this would put it on the political terrain of trying to out-nationalist the nationalists. In the absence of an international revolutionary situation, this would seem to mean advocating a national statist, ‘socialism in one country’ path – looking perhaps to Cuba, Venezuela, Putin’s Russia and maybe Iran and North Korea for trading partners (Xu Jinping’s riding imperialist China would be as tough a proposition as Trump’s USA!). This does not seem to be a very inviting prospect, except perhaps for those ardent national sovereigntists from an old official (i.e. state-backed) Communist Party background. They have never found red/brown alliances a problem – as with the Stalin-Hitler Pact; Mao’s support for Savimbi’s largely tribalist UNITA in Angola; and post-CPSU Putin’s courting of the Front National and Jobbik.

Therefore, it is not on the political terrain of Brexit (or Scoxit) that the Left should be challenging Scottish national sovereigntists. We need to remain democratic internationalists and challenge internationalist pretensions of the neo-liberal internationalists. The response of the neo-liberal few in the USA, UK and EU to the 2008 Crisis showed they have abandoned any pretence that their wider institutions are for the benefit of the many. They have laid the grounds for the less hypocritical right national populist few – they just don’t give a shit. They want to pave the path for a global economy, where the last vestiges of shared international political and economic institutions or agreements are overthrown and replaced by state-by-state deals, the better to enforce untrammelled US corporate power, backed by the increased threat or use of US military might.

However, the millions of EU citizens living and working in the UK, and of UK subjects living and working in the EU, already form the basis for a wider European solidarity and citizenship [8]. This is why they are in the front line of the attacks from the hard and far right. We need to protect this legacy of the EU. This was never the intent of the EU’s ‘internationalism from above’ advocates. It was developed in everyday life by workers, students and others on a practical ‘internationalism from below’ basis.

And in Scotland, as in Catalunya, there are already many millions who can see through not only their anti-democratic unionist states – the UK and the semi-Francoist Spain – but the major shortcomings of the EU based on existing states. When this political understanding is linked to the economic struggle against austerity, the social struggle for oppressed minority rights (and in the case of women, oppressed majority rights), or the political struggle against imperial wars and military alliances such as NATO, then a democratic and internationalist Left strategy should be to the forefront.

Meanwhile in Scotland and the UK, we cannot leave it to the uncertain outcome of the political firefights between the neo-liberal and right populists within the state’s profoundly undemocratic institutions. One of the greatest working class victories, was when the threat of much wider strike action led to the release of the five imprisoned Pentonville dockers in July 1972. Under the Crown Powers, an official solicitor was suddenly conjured up, so the British ruling class could save face. But the incoming 1974 Labour government thought that this proved the benign nature of the UK state. They even sanctioned the crown’s ousting of Gough Whitlam’s fraternal Australian Labour

government in 1975. More recently, Jeremy Corbyn, whilst not bowing before the Queen, saw nothing anti-democratic in attending the Privy Council in November 2015 [9]. Yet this Privy Council has just sanctioned the proroguing of Westminster.

In the UK state senior military police, judges and civil servants all swear an oath of loyalty not to Westminster, never mind the people, but to the crown. When we mount our campaign of civil disobedience, we should not be fobbed off with official solicitors, or anybody else brought out of the crown closet. Our republican 'internationalism from below' support for the break-up of the UK state, needs to be part of a wider challenge to their crown powers. This is in the best political interests of our class and for genuine democracy, not only in Scotland, but in Northern Ireland/Ireland, Wales but of England too, and beyond.

Allan Armstrong, 12 September 2019

Footnotes

[1] This article by Allan Armstrong of the Scottish Radical Independence Campaign has been submitted for publication to *Conter* (<https://www.conter.co.uk>), a Scottish website of Marxist debate sponsored by the RISE organisation. RISE [Respect Internationalism Socialism Environmentalism (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RISE_-_Scotland%27s_Left_Alliance)] was established in 2015 by the Scottish Left Project and other forces, initially as an electoral alliance to contest the 2016 Scottish Parliament elections in which it was supported by the Scottish Socialist Party but achieved a disappointing vote of only 0.5%. RISE has continued as a radical social movement and discussion forum but ceased electoral activity. Conter has published articles that set out a position of support for the current government's exit from the European Union by the UK state, claiming a Marxist basis for this - a position generally known as 'Lexit', held by amongst others the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and a number of former SWP members. Lexit is not supported by Socialist Resistance (SR) or by Allan Armstrong, and SR is publishing the article as the first contribution to a wider debate across the UK and internationally of the relationship between Brexit and Scottish Independence. For a general overview of current Scottish politics see this article from SR: (ESSF (article 50407), [Brexit Crisis: Scottish independence grows nearer](#).)] The article has been slightly edited by SR from that submitted to Conter, with some explanatory phrases for a non-Scottish audience inserted.

[2] For an analysis of such developments see Allan Armstrong, National Populism at <https://intfrobel.com/e-books/#national>

[3] Ian Allinson, An Open Letter and Petition to Len McCluskey <http://republicancommunist.org/blog/2018/08/27/open-letter-and-petition-to-len-mccluskey/> ; Ian Allinson, Grassroots UNITE candidate attacks Coyne's and McCluskey's capitulation to Anti-Migrant Politics <http://republicancommunist.org/blog/2017/01/03/grassroots-unite-leadership-candidate-attacks-mccluskeys-and-coynes-capitulation-to-anti-migrant-politics/>

[4] I was involved in the early debates with Lexiters in the Radical Independence Campaign. I debated with Donny Gluckstein of the SWP at the Edinburgh RIC branch in June 2015: - <http://radicalindyedinburgh.blogspot.com/2015/06/the-eu-referendum.html> and with Neil Davidson of RS21 at the national RIC conference held in Edinburgh in February 2016. <http://republicancommunist.org/blog/2016/04/12/a-political-comparison-between-the-2012-14-scottish-independence-referendum-and-the-2016-eu-referendum-campaign/>

[5] Of course, the Scottish Left has already been here with the Tommy Sheridan fiasco. Although to

Salmond's credit, he resigned from his party whilst his court case is pending.

[6] For an analysis of the politics and events leading to the UK's constitutional crisis see Allan Armstrong - "It's the constitution stupid - After the Boris 'coup' let's fUK it!" on <http://republicancommunist.org/blog/2019/08/30/after-boriss-coup-lets-fuk-it-its-the-constitution-stupid/>

[7] <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2018/09/09/hedge-funds-wager-3bn-pound-plunging-year-amid-no-deal-brexid/>

[8] Allan Armstrong, The Reality of the European Democratic Revolution, <http://republicancommunist.org/blog/2016/10/18/the-reality-of-the-european-democratic-revolution/>

P.S.

- Socialist Resistance. Posted on 4th October 2019: <http://socialistresistance.org/the-contradictions-underlying-brexid-and-scottish-independence/18211>