

# **The SNP, Scottish Nationalism, and the Class Struggle**

**Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow**

Anarchist Federation

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Scottish nationalism, and symbiotic to this the Scottish National Party, have transformed from outside forces in the political consciousness of Scotland to become deeply embedded in everyday politics. This change acts as a perfect example, and warning, of how electoral politics and nationalism are used to divide the working class, poison radical politics, and secure the position of the ruling class.

However, the events taking place in Scotland are too often viewed in isolation from one another, even by those of us that live there. This has led to a lack of appreciation of the social and economic forces at play and given rise to analysis of the political landscape in Scotland that present the situation here as something to aspire to.

This piece aims to give a feel for the over-arching sweep of events in Scotland since the mid-nineties, contextualise the rise of a nationalism that is as divisive as any other, and show how faith in electoral state solutions has cast a shadow of reforms that will easily vanish in the proposed new dawn of an independent Scotland.

## **The Calm before the Storm**

### ***Scotland from the Nineties***

Nationalism in Scotland was a fringe element; many people's only real awareness of nationalists was as a bunch of weirdoes who harked back to a quasi-mythical time where Scotland was 'free' of English rule, fanatics that held an ongoing vigil for Scotland in a hut at the bottom of Calton Hill, while people pushing for more widespread use of Gaelic and Scots were treated as a joke.

Mainstream nationalist political expression came through sentiment to protect Scottish farmers and fishing rights. In more urban and industrial areas it was socialist sentiment (mainly channelled towards the Labour Party) that was seen as a way to protect Scottish industry. The main exception to this was in the notion that North Sea oil belonged to Scotland. In the social sphere an often violent hatred of anyone seen as English existed despite often being strongly denied.

As the nineties ground on the fortunes of the Conservative Party were in steady decline. The SNP could see that a change was in the air and had already began a polished style of presentation that has served them well to this day. Their general outlook is to present a different face to the different regions of Scotland, playing to the needs of their electorate.

The North of Scotland has them put farming, fishing, and big business (mainly in the form of the oil industry) at the heart of any campaign. To the East-coast and Central Belt they put forward more progressive conservative ideas as their own. In the West they take up the mantle of Old Labour, discussing the need for a social safety net and generally coming across as centre-left.

This presentation style was to pay off. The SNP gained three seats in the 1997 general election (doubling the number held), before going on to form the official opposition to the LibDem-Labour coalition that would be formed as the majority body of the Scottish Parliament after its first election in 1999.

The devolved bodies in Scotland and Wales had been set up by Labour with an eye to a dispersal of power that would mean that even when they would lose Westminster to the Tories, they would likely gain back some power in these venues as a reaction to Tory rule. This would also help cement Scottish seats in Westminster, many of which had been held by Labour for generations. The thought that Scottish nationalism in general, and the SNP in particular, could become

a strong enough force to upset this balance seemed unlikely. Meanwhile, the only element on the left to give any serious time to idea of an independent Scotland was the Scottish Socialist Party.

## **Clouds Gather**

### ***The pre-referendum build-up***

The initial wave of concessions given by the Labour Party in the wake of their landslide victory of 1997, such as the minimum wage and working tax credits, started to wear thin. Parallel to this, the role of the government to manage capitalism within the state led to the massively unpopular second Iraq War, the acceleration of privatisation schemes (most notable within public transport and the NHS), and the sharp increase in racist narratives around immigration, refugees, and asylum seeking.

The left, in the form of trade unions and Trotskyist front-groups, confined their opposition to the Labour Party to hot air speeches and symbolic acts, such as A to B marches. One million people marched against the Iraq War before being effectively dismantled by the SWP's Stop the War Coalition. Labour's policies were no different in their antagonism to the working class than anything the Tories could dream up, but were given a free pass.

It is against this mounting disenchantment with Labour that a second wave of elections in the Scottish Parliament led to many smaller parties (such as the Greens and the SSP) winning seats. It was dubbed the rainbow parliament, a moniker that was to prove apt. While there was a huge variety of voices, and many from the socialist left, they were to do little more than act as the vocal social conscience of parliament, free to stand up and denounce any ill, before being side-lined. Democracy had taken place and those fringe elements that wanted to make gains would have to compromise their ideals to do so.

Just like it's namesake, the promises of the rainbow parliament were to provide an illusion that could never be reached no matter how much energy was used to try, while those seeking an independent Scotland pointed to a pot of gold that the working class will never see. However, this set-up went a long way to help reinforce the idea that Scotland was somehow more democratic and more fair, helping legitimise both electoral/reformist politics and those who were building towards independence.

Within this setting of the first two Scottish parliaments the SNP were able to forge for themselves a legitimacy that they had been denied in any other venue. With no Tory party to speak of, they took up the mantle of the opposition with perfect form. As Labour increasingly relied on scare tactics to try and hold onto voters, the SNP started to make the case that they were the progressive alternative not only to Labour but also to a distant Westminster. Political relevance was linked to a narrative of physical closeness. No room was given to the thought that the halls of Westminster had no relevance to the working class of London, let alone any other part of the UK.

The SNP were left as the only voice in Scottish politics acting in the traditional role of the opposition, able to talk big and attack the government for any woes to take place. Even positive policy put in place by the Scottish Lib/Lab government, such as free NHS prescriptions, could be used by the SNP opposition as an illustration of the strengths of having an independent Scottish state.

Hand-in-hand with their play for legitimacy in government circles came a push for the legitimacy of Scottish nationalist sentiment within the social sphere. Recognition and display of the multiple languages in Scotland, and ideas that Scotland has its own unique Scottish culture, and narratives of being a fairer and just people all started to be repeated.

This narrative led to the adoption of the jingoistic idea of 'civic nationalism'. Proposed as an acceptable form of nationalism, the claim is that it is based upon ideals and that it stands in contrast to a cultural or ethnic nationalism. However, taking a look at 'civic nationalist' North European countries who are already independent (such as Norway or Sweden), we can see there is no easy division between cultural/ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism. Citizenship is not determined by ideals, but by meeting the cultural expectations and economic needs of the nation-state.

The backdrop of a legitimate form of nationalism taking up space public discourse, of nationalist ideas being cemented in the public sphere, and of the SNP being seen a legitimate opposition to the doom-and-gloom offered by an increasingly unpopular Labour Party, all combined to provide the nationalists with a win in the Scottish Parliament (forming a coalition alongside the Scottish Green Party).

By this point the SSP had self-destructed around the scandals to hit Tommy Sheridan, while the Labour Party carried on seemingly blind to the mounting opposition they faced. Thinking that this was simply their time out of Parliament while they had power in Westminster, they reasoned behind the scenes that when the Tories eventually pushed them out of the UK Government that their supporters would usher them back in the North.

The SNP, however, were able to still able to play the part of the opposition even while in power. Positioning themselves against the UK Government they took a longer-term view of first cementing their position before a move for an independence referendum. Labour, Tories, and LibDems all carried on as normal, unable to adjust to the new angle of nationalist rhetoric, despite constantly being outmanoeuvred by the SNP.

## **The Sky Opens Up**

### ***The independence campaign kicks in***

With the prospect of a referendum looming the possibility to be able to hold politicians feet to the fire opened up. Even now, if independence were to occur then the working class in Scotland would probably see some temporary concessions that would later be stripped away or made redundant while the government followed something akin to the pattern of the Isle of Man in terms of becoming a banking haven while pandering to the oil industry. This would be in much the same way Tony Blair gave some concessions when New Labour swept to power in order to clear the way for a highly accelerated privatisation programme.

The option opened for radicals to call for changes to be made in areas the Scottish Parliament had some oversight, and keep pushing the envelope on these areas. A radical left campaign making noise on specific issues and demanding change before the referendum could have been a big enough thorn in the 'Yes' campaign that its leaders would have to cater to in some way.

Unfortunately the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) was set up by the ISG, a mainly-local split from the SWP, with the goal of them forging a new party of the left to replace the stump of the SSP in the political class of Scotland. By providing a degree of autonomy to local

campaigning groups while keeping the focus solely on electoral politics, RIC it was able to forge a space for talk of a 'new party of the left' while also making the completely erroneous claim that what they were doing was somehow radical. RIC (along with most of the left in Scotland), started the independence campaign with a whimper and did little more than play the role of the left wing voice of the 'Yes' campaign.

Because of this, as the date of the referendum crept closer, RIC was effectively subsumed into the 'Yes' campaign as their voice of the left, in much the same way the SSP played their part in the to legitimise the rainbow parliament. 'Yes' and RIC would share the same platform, agree on most points, and back one another in support of a common nationalist goal. As the referendum got closer RIC activists often dropped the distinction, canvassing directly for the Yes camp.

Increasingly electoralism in general, and an independent Scottish nation-state in particular, were pushed as only true way to enact radical change. Even large swaths of the anarchist movement in Scotland started to see the referendum as a means to radical change, abandoning the anarchist analysis of referenda as a means to offer legitimacy to the social relations of the state.

The SNP, who had already made large moves to entertain capitalist interests, found that they were given a free hand by the Scottish left and so were to go largely unchallenged even when making overtures to their suitability to lead a nation-state. This was most visible when they dropped their commitment to leave NATO should they end up in charge of a newly-formed state, an action that had more vocal opposition from inside the party than from without.

As the campaign gathered a pace the SNP carried on presenting themselves as the opposition, now as the counter-point to the ConDem coalition. Without anyone pressing them hard on putting in place concessions, the SNP were able to target emergent areas of militant class struggle and disarm then co-opt working class movements that could harm their nationalist programme. Struggles around the bedroom tax, fracking, and the independent living fund, all of which led to militant direct action south of the border, were given concessions by an SNP eager to have smooth publicity around the referendum.

While it is good that these concessions have been made, we need to be clear that they were granted without the formation of a militant and self-organised working class and so without that build-up will be easier to dismantle once their usefulness had passed. These concessions also act as an indication of how fragile the nationalist campaign was in the run-up to the referendum, showing an opportunity missed, and a disappointing lack of initiative and a complete lack of class analysis from self-declared radicals. Many who would normally have engaged in agitation for working class struggle had been swayed enough by the ideas of nationalism that they didn't build for confrontation out of a sense of shared interest in the founding of a nation-state (no matter how critical they claimed their position to be).

The struggle between competing nationalisms, British and Scottish, has created one of the most worrying changes in ideological outlook in Scotland.

On one hand, the media bias against an independent Scottish State was so blatant that many of those who started the road to the referendum mildly in favour would become strongly entrenched nationalists out of a sense of embattled outrage over the coverage given. The reputation of the BBC, once given a large degree of trust, is now often questioned as a result. A huge political campaign swung into gear, with 'Yes' posters, stickers and badges far outnumbering the 'Better Together' efforts in terms of visibility.

The reality of civic nationalism also came to light as the SNP backed an Australian-style points-based immigration system which would act as an incredibly racist, exclusive form of immigration

selection. This isn't to deny that an SNP government is more likely to accept an increased number of immigrants, but rather than being out of some civic sense of fairness it would be selecting those seen as needed to a Scottish economy in order to offset an ageing population and ensure a competitive labour force.

In terms of foreign policy, the SNP's civic nationalism is concerned with uniting the country in order to out-compete on the global market, and to be a strong ally for the US, NATO and the EU. Presumably it seeks to support a 'civic', 'inclusive' rather than 'jingoistic' imperialism.

On the other hand, loyalist sentiment and a reactionary Protestant undercurrent awoke from its dormancy, pushing to remain part of Britain under the Queen. The Orange Order, and its supporters, would become increasingly vocal as time wore on, and while not as visible as the 'Yes' campaign, their long-term place within many communities would provide an undercurrent of British nationalist influence across Scotland.

The mainstream British nationalist campaign, 'Better Together', was its own worst enemy. 'Better Together' could simply sit back and claim that anything coming out of the independence camp was a fantasy and that they were getting on with keeping a firm hand on the tiller. Instead, it followed in the footsteps of a Labour Party keen to scare voters away from the SNP.

Condescending, patronising and paternalistic scare stories came out of the 'Better Together' camp on what seemed like a daily basis, pushing people into the 'Yes' camp and helping entrench the newly formed, and exceptionally close positions. Possibly the best example of this is the advert of the 'Better Together Woman', which instantly became a source of national mockery.

Worse than this, in Inverness an elected Labour Party MP, Dame Anne Begg, took her party to the streets to campaign against breaking up the union alongside Dave McDonald. McDonald is the Scottish leader of the far-right National Front! Any suggestion that they did not know one another is unbelievable given that McDonald had been active in electoral politics for the area since 2003 and they had been active in campaigning against one another in that time. The Labour Party were happy to be 'Better Together' with Nazis.

The mass engagement that took place around this campaign, lauded by so many, was totally encompassed within these nationalist paradigms. Grassroots groups and coal-face campaigns were diverted to discussion of nationalist ends. People were putting their energy into supporting one form of state or another, and leaving the real problems facing them here and now unchallenged. Nationalism and electoralism had combined to keep mounting class tensions focussed on helping mediate a dispute within the ruling classes.

## **Eye of the Storm**

### ***The direct aftermath of Indyref***

The morning after the referendum the disappointment was palpable. A huge feeling of a missed opportunity was talked about openly, and many who voted 'no' started to talk openly about how they, both personally and collectively as a nation, had messed up. Alternately those in the 'yes' camp often presented the outcome as a generational division made up of younger voters, with less to lose, voting yes and the older generation, with more at risk, going the conservative route and voting no.

In any case, the real winners were the SNP and to a lesser extent the Scottish Green Party, as membership of both parties soared. The Green Party website crashed first thing in the morning

with the number of people trying to join while the SNP themselves starting along a path that would lead them to having over 100,000 members. Working class families that had been Labour supporters for three or four generations now burned their membership cards (literally, posting the videos and photos on Facebook). Even some anarchists, breaking with anything close to a prefigurative politics, would join these neo-liberal parties in an 'ends justify the means' mind-set of somehow holding these parties to account.

In stark contrast to the mainstream parties, grass-roots working class campaigning groups did not see any real change in numbers. If anything there has been a slight decline as those leftists who have been involved in pushing for independence under the RIC banner carried on in nationalist campaigns and building towards a 'new left' fringe party in the style of Syriza and Podemos.

In Glasgow the 'Better Together' celebration was something that had been a worry for long-term anti-fascists. British nationalists in the form of loyalists, football casuals, and fascists linked up in the streets and were seen for the first time acting side-by-side. A violent right-wing riot took place where people were attacked for wearing 'Yes' badges, while the police did little more than ensure that shops and business interests were protected. The Herald, the only newspaper to come out in favour of independence, was the target of an arson attack.

As a reaction, many who had been 'Yes' voters started to refer to themselves as "The 45%". This came along with cringe worthy slogans such as declaring themselves the "democratic minority and moral majority" and repeatedly referring to George Square in Glasgow as "Freedom Square" (laying claim to the Glasgow majority in favour of an independent Scottish state). More clear-thinking political campaigners were able to curb most of this, however, seeing in it a defeatist element.

A huge amount of 'Yes' propaganda remains visible to the present day. People kept the posters in their windows and stickers in their cars. People wearing 'Yes' badges is commonplace. The general feeling from those who voted 'Yes' is that there will be another referendum at some point soon and they want to be ready for it.

## **Riding the Deluge**

### ***Surrounding the 2015 General Election***

The General Election came at the perfect time for SNP. With their fresh membership eager to do something for the party they held planning meetings to rally branches that were full of people swept up in an ideology that said that what they were participating in was in some way new. The party sent every new member a pack with a poster for the window (now going up beside the 'Yes' material), and a badge. Members were encouraged to engage people on the question of who they were voting for.

However this discussion went far beyond members pushing a party line. General chat in the street was that nobody, honestly nobody, was going to vote for the Labour Party (in much the same way people turned their back on the Tories). The LibDems and SSP had died while the Greens didn't have the numbers. Everyone who was voting seemed to be voting for the SNP.

On the west coast the reaction to this was for Labour to give more concessions to unionists of the Orange Order in the form of approval of their marches and the rubber-stamping of 'Orange Fest', a day-long celebration of protestant culture in the centre of Glasgow that mainly involved



old men getting up on a stage to decry the Catholics in our midst. Elsewhere in Scotland the letterbox scare stories that had failed to help keep the Scottish Parliament in Labour hands and had so spectacularly backfired during the referendum campaign were deployed once more. If it seemed like nobody in the Labour Party had taken note of what had been happening in Scotland over the past decade it would be because nobody in the Labour Party had been paying attention as to what had been happening in Scotland for the past decade.

As a result the SNP swept into all but three Scottish seats.

Talk in the run-up to the general election had been of the Labour/SNP coalition as a possibility, and while Labour ruled it out (fantasising about a win), the SNP made overtures to working in coalition on a case-by-case basis. While this might seem to the new supporters to have been the SNP's preferred outcome a Tory win was the best possible result and what the SNP leadership had been hoping for. The near clean sweep of Scottish seats gave a feeling of victory to the party membership, showing that after a narrow defeat there was victory to be gained from electoral politics in general and the SNP in particular.

At the same time they were able to put any blame for their lack of ability to make changes on several external factors. First, they were able to blame being in opposition of the failures of the Labour party in England, criticising them for abandoning the working class while at the same time making public overtures to forming up an effective opposition with them (that they know won't be accepted). At the same time they can say that the lack of change is down to being a minority in an unfair Westminster system that they are seeking a break from.

The SNP are playing the role of the political opposition to the current government in a way that seems to have been lost to others. They blame the government, (or Labour, or Westminster, or something else) for the bad things that happen. They can also talk up small differences in how services run to make them seem like huge gains for Scotland, and generally say whatever plays well.

To keep people on-side they present a centre-left position and are still making the tactical choice to give minor concessions to any working class social movements forming before they have secured an independent nation-state, while quietly shoring up police and bureaucratic power.

A great example of this was when a rumble of opposition to a new woman's prison being built started to be heard in public. The SNP closed the building project off just as the anti-prison movement started to discuss how to gain popular support (proposing tactics similar to those used to build popular opposition to the Wrexham Mega-prison). However, nothing was done to stop the conditions that have led to the proposed prison and the SNP instead suggested the use of other punitive measures as soon as the self-organised working class opposition had been demobilised.

The main narrative of the SNP can be summed up as:

- *"A stronger voice for Scotland"* – A move to give the SNP increased democratic legitimacy
- *"Getting what was promised"* – Appeals to justice, so that whatever further powers are devolved can be both welcomed but also written off as not enough or shy of the mark.
- *"An end to austerity"* – a popular call, but completely at odds with the attacks on working class communities that SNP-led councils are undertaking.

This has been happening so much so that leftists in England look to them and talk of them being somehow left wing. The play by Jeremy Corbyn to reinvigorate the Labour Party and become leader of his party follows much the same idea of being seen as a valid opposition to those in charge that the SNP has used to gain their legitimacy. Much like Labour would talk up Tony Benn as a paradigm of socialism while ignoring his vicious attacks on the working class, Corbyn was able to push a neo-liberal economic policy while being seen as standing up for the working class.

In all these cases of an alternative being presented, regardless of if it was SNP or socialist in origin, we can see the old trick of an opposition party giving an all-things-to-all-people public face, while pursuing a moderately progressive yet mainly 'small-c' conservative social agenda that isn't too far removed from the 'compassionate' conservatism of some Tories and the centre-right of the Green Party. However, all parties will head up an economic policy of a neo-liberal capitalism that will give concessions to big business, and follows very strongly in the third-way politics of New Labour despite the denials.

The SNP in particular position themselves as neither left-wing nor right-wing, but a party of national interest. This rhetoric is frightening to any class struggle anarchist, as the civic nationalism that was originally presented as harmless now drops its facade and outright folds popular support into a nationalism that openly divides the class.

Those groups on the frontlines of struggle still have not seen the boom in activity or engagement that left nationalists claim to have taken place. Attempts to consolidate grassroots opposition, such as the 'Action Against Austerity' network, now not only have to contend with the actions of those in power, but also attempts by authoritarian leftists to join under the guise of them taking direct action. However, they are not doing this to build a self-organised working class counter power but to co-opt working class action for their own party building. At the same time grassroots groups are having to fight against the calls within their own ranks to get behind any nationalist program and even calls to give the SNP a chance, as if they were not the cause of many of the problems being faced. If such groups and networks succumb to party-builders and nationalist sentiment then they will be doomed to failure.

## **Rain, Rain, Go Away**

### ***Next steps***

It is always dangerous to speculate on the future of social and political trends. However, between the first draft and the final version of this piece being written one of the predictions came true, so with the dangers of prediction in mind...

The Scottish 'new party of the left' finally stitched itself together from the stumps of the SSP and the ISG. It's called Rise. I reckon this is an appropriate name, given that parliamentary socialism is a zombie that refuses to just fuck off and die. I wouldn't be shocked if some Scottish anarchists jump onto their ship, citing pragmatism while following a plan of action that has been conclusively shown to fail on its own terms. Lefties are talking about this being a Scottish Syriza and I couldn't agree more. They are a dangerous diversion against class struggle, set to create political apathy through their failure.

The upcoming Scottish parliamentary elections are likely to be a consolidation of power for the SNP, and while not as heavy a sweep as for Westminster it will be a strong victory. The Green

Party are likely to pick up seats from the parliamentary list system while the other parties will scramble over the remains. Again, the SNP will be able to point at this as representative of a fairer Scotland and use it as leverage to push their agenda.

If the Green Party do well and Rise put in a decent show, then we may see a return to the 'rainbow parliament' in four years' time; and with both these parties standing on a platform of independence the scene may be set for another referendum earlier than folks expect. There is already a push for 'Yes2' in 2018, which on one hand sounds far too optimistic (as it is usually at least a decade between repeat referenda), but on the other it may be pushed by events in the Scottish parliament.

In any case Scottish independence now seems inevitable, it is just a question of when. The longer the SNP can hold off the more young voters (who are generally Yes-leaning) come of age while the older generation (which voted in a conservative No) dies off. However, the longer they wait, the more times they will have had to choose between implementing austerity measures and losing popularity or giving concessions. This means that until independence takes place there is still the opportunity to really push for large gains for the working class. Unfortunately, the way in which nationalism has divided us as a class and the huge re-establishment of electoral politics are preventing effective movements from forming.

Many speculate that upon independence that the SNP will fragment and disappear. While there would be some inevitable breakaways, on the whole the nature of power and hierarchy suggests to me that the SNP will weather the storm under the guise of protecting their gains from old enemies, then under the notion of doing the best for Scotland. In doing so it will finish its transformation into the 'small-c' conservative party for Scotland.

Authoritarian Trotskyist and Leninist groups will be leeching onto any eruptions of spontaneous class activity they can in order to take control and bleed them dry for members. While they make lots of talk about building grassroots movements, they have no interest in helping develop working class self-organisation. Instead they simply want to insert their party at the head of any emerging struggles. We have already seen the disgraced Socialist Workers Party buying their way back into campaigns and trying to use front-group tactics to give an air of legitimacy to their actions, while the Revolutionary Communist Group continue to parachute into areas while claiming their move to take charge is an act of solidarity.

Where does that leave anarchists and other libertarians?

I reckon we will, as ever, be involved in the struggles that affect our lives. In doing so we need to be aware that reformist electoralism and nationalism will need to be faced. Diversions towards campaigns to simply replace one local mob of crooked politicians with another will be strong, while electoral options and nationalist futures will try to turn our heads.

To win the leadership of ideas I feel anarchists need to ensure that we are always putting our principled end goals into effect through our current calls for action, and making sure that we challenge others to do the same. If someone says they are voting for the SNP or are wanting to see an independent Scotland then find out why. Often it will be for an end result we hold in common, such as ending poverty or dismantling the detention system. We can argue the case for their involvement in groups founded on the principle of collective self-organisation, that take direct action over elections, and that reveal the perils of a nationalist ideology though securing their active participation in class struggle.

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