

Rhetoric of disempowerment

Anarchist Federation of Scotland

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Last week, the date for the Scottish independence referendum was announced with at least an attempt at a fanfare. To mark this historic occasion, we revisit some of the arguments made earlier and look at the rhetoric both sides of the debate are using.

In representative democracies, those involved in or attempting to manage political power tend to divide themselves into two main camps. One is more forthright and barefaced in representing business interests, the other provides more of a progressive narrative and promise of reforms, but is ultimately just as committed to ‘economic growth’ – the endless pursuit of profit. The camps alternate all the time, and the nature of their division changes, but it’s remarkable how effective this semblance of debate is in maintaining passive support for the smooth running of capitalism and the confusion of any genuine opposition to it.

This is a pretty basic socialist argument. As Chomsky puts it, “The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum [...]”.

In Scotland, the spectrum of debate is articulated not in the usual parliamentary competition between parties but between the Yes and No coalitions in the Independence debate. Gathering support for their respective positions, the arguments they use are coded with the rhetoric of disempowerment: most importantly for us, discouraging and demobilising autonomous working class organising, the one thing that actually challenges capitalism.

It doesn’t take much effort to show this in the Unionists’ propaganda – for years they have succeeded in making sure that a large proportion of working class people are entirely disengaged not only from power politics but apathetic about the possibility of any change. Their strategy is to keep up an ongoing negative assault on the SNP government and its referendum plans, but also on any vision for a different, hopefully better, future. Taking it in turns, ConDem ministers and faceless Labour bureaucrats churn out press releases which the mainstream media gladly lap up and put on the front page. Scotland will be a nation of benefit claimants dependent on a trickle of oil. Plans for defence are a fantasy. You’ll lose aw yer pensions! As Iain MacWhirter puts it, “The Unionists are expert at feeding the fear that Scots have of “getting above themselves””. And this, the message of ‘Who do you think you are, you lowly Scotch prole?’ is coupled with ‘If you think it’s bad now, you’ve seen nothing yet!’.

But disempowerment is as much a part of the arguments of the Yes camp. This isn’t to say that Independence doesn’t represent the more ‘progressive’ option in the debate. It offers reforms when their opponents don’t even pretend to (although they might have to, in the end) and this is also its ideological role. Of course, many on the left have excellent reasons for being involved in the Yes campaign and the Radical Independence Conference (RIC): demands for an end to inequality, the fight for feminism and for a sustainable society. An independent Scotland is more likely to grant some reforms in these areas than Westminster, but these will be always be most limited, threatened by erosion and contradicted by the the real power of the economy.

A few things crop up repeatedly in the pro-Independence narrative:

1) Deferring the future.

The referendum will be the ‘most important decision you are going to make in your lifetime’, as one Yes commentator argues. I don’t know about you, but I think we can make more important decisions. History is meant to bend towards this date. Our present struggles are tied to it, and

emptied of their threat. Change will happen, if it's going to, more than eighteen months from now. 'Wait until we get rid of Westminster'. In the meantime this is the time of preparation and 'making the case' for the big day.

The independence-supporting left will be actively involved in grassroots campaigns. But whereas we see organising in these campaigns as being a source of resistance in general, with the potential to spread and grow, they see it as secondary to the constitutional process and part of its propaganda war. In some cases, were independence to be successful, it could remove specific Tory-style injustices, but it couldn't remove the class antagonism which throws up the need for these campaigns. In an independent Scotland there will be new campaigns and new injustices. We should fight where we stand and make history now.

2) The use of 'We'.

Here's what Alex Salmond had to say in Parliament:

On the 18th September 2014 the people will decide Scotland's future. We take responsibility for our own country, when we're able to speak with our own voice, choose our own direction and contribute in our own distinct way. The day we stand on our own two feet to claim a future.

Without this 'we' the whole independence movement would fall apart. It is the collective, civic national 'we', constructed to paper over class differences. In fact, it's exactly the same as the Tories' 'we're all in this together' rhetoric, but in a Scottish context. This 'we' includes Scottish bosses, managers, politicians, millionaires and their lackies who are and will always fight for their own interests and against ours. But what would it mean for the working class to 'speak with our own voice, choose our own direction and ... stand on our own two feet to claim a future'? Well, for a start it would recognize that we are a class and the struggle between classes, our exploitation and need to resist it, happens whether we want to believe it or not. But we'd be a lot more bloody successful if we did believe it, rejected all cross-class 'social partnership' and organised for ourselves. Why wait to do this?

3) Social Democratic Realism

For those on the left the choice now seems to be 'Social Democracy or Barbarism'. Opt for an independent capitalist country with a commitment to state security, reasonably progressive taxation etc. or accept an ever worsening Tory austerity hellhole. The differences between the mainstream Yes Campaign and the left-wing pro-independence campaign aren't great, but a difference of degree: *more* social democracy, and not so much reduced corporation tax. RIC supporters share platforms with politicians and endorse similar vague language of 'democracy' and 'equality', 'self-determination' and in their case 'radicalism' itself. In asserting this choice, all other options are shut down and deemed unrealistic. Social partnership is now the only thing left. If it's seen as only a step towards socialism, like all stagism it will only ever manage to create another stage and try to justify why we don't actually organise directly against capitalism now.

If you think that I'm creating a false choice of my own, and that we can work for independence as a progressive step forward and for a future based on social needs without private profit,

how is this possible whilst also promoting a national rather than class-based perspective, giving prominence to a future point of change rather than our class struggles here and now, and by accepting the language and ideology of social partnership?

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