

Report: Radical Independant Conference

24/11/12 – Glasgow

Anarchist Federation

November 27, 2012

With the continuous nearing of the referendum on Scottish independence, the nation's future and heated debate on pros and cons of the topic have dominated the media and the everyday lives of those involved in politics. Particularly in regards to the rise of Alex Salmond's government to power, it can almost be said that the political scene we are all used to – discussions on healthcare, education and international relations – has been put on the backburner for an indefinite amount of time. As the movement has gained momentum, the Scottish Left has been quick to ride the wave towards a more determinable future through the Radical Independence Conference.

The conference, which took place in Glasgow's Radisson Blue hotel on the 24th of November, was structured along the themes of worker's and civil rights in an independent Scotland, withdrawal from American-led imperialism through ties forged in the Special Alliance, NATO and Trident, and the concept of better representation through a decentralised republic and the internationalisation of its politics. These topics were divided into ten workshops, shared out between two sessions and a separate event dedicated to members of internationally affiliated organisations.

It was pleasing to notice the abundance of youth representation featured at the event. Young members were present from most of the major parties of the Left, and it was admittedly inspiring to see the emergence of cross-ideological platformism and consciousness over the political engines that for so long have laid rusting in the countryside of our history. The younger generation also appeared to enjoy a relative permeability into the higher circles of the organisation, with several such individuals being invited to opening speeches and constructive input in discussions.

Of the most positive impressions taken away from the conference, the value of input from the audience presented some insightful and equally radical opinions and, of equal importance, questions to pose to the chairs and top-end speakers hosting the workshops. The 'Scottish Republic: What is Real Democracy?' session, one of the two I had time to participate in, was hosted by various republican organisations based in Scotland. As the discussion evolved, the public was quick to respond to several concerns including the necessity of a decentralised republic based on grass root parish-level democracy and the desire for an alternative to any form of head of state.

A desire for an overall repatriation of decision-making powers to bottom-up sources of representation was also expressed in the second session I went to titled 'Organising the 99 percent:

building in trade unions and communities’, with those present pushing for the radicalisation of unions into more transparent political organs and their separation from dominant political parties.

Reforms of a radicalness in Scotland’s foreign policy equal to the push for change within the United Kingdom in its current form were also suggested in the wake of accounts by representatives hailing from different continents and nations of the world of their own struggles. Among the nations present were the Basque Country, Quebec-Canada, France and Greece. It was also encouraging to hear a push towards the reversal of positions concerning the Palestine –Israel conflict, proposing a boycott on the latter, and a significant step towards the demilitarisation of nuclear arms worldwide.

With topics ranging from national to international and individual to republican, the scope of the conference’s programme left the greater majority of the delegates positive, hopeful and inspired. Applauses erupted systematically in the last turns of the closing ceremony. There were, however, some fundamental concerns that were voiced by a significant number of the 800 individuals present on the day, the dismissal of which will likely jeopardise the potential the RIC could fulfil should they not be confronted with seriousness and dedication.

Whilst the need for a decentralised republic was frequently expressed, the impression was given that the participants hosted a degree of radicalism which exceeded that of the majority of the speakers present. Whilst the worlds ‘participatory democracy’ were uttered with frequency, they were not in coherence with elements of the audience which pushed for direct democratic processes. Criticism crystallised also around the impression that the event featured too many top speakers, and too little time for discussion – the first workshop I was in managed only ten contributions from the audience. There were also concerns as to the what legitimacy such an organisation could offer, when its political activity and issues raised are predominantly tied to the central belt of Scottish politics. A delegate with whom I spoke briefly at the end of the conference raised a point that, should Scotland demand independence from the Union on the premise diversity and sovereignty, so will the Highlands, Outer Hebrides, Orkney and the Shetlands demand the same of their mainland countrymen. A consideration of their communities’ needs and situation was all but missing in a conference dedicated to a future, radical Scotland.

There is also another question to be asked, one that was the dominant presence amongst the concerns raised by the general public. How will the RIC be able to challenge a neo-liberal dominated government and protect the communities and sections of society it is currently reaching out to? It will most certainly have to radicalise in accordance to the demands of its supporters, a move that will require a formal, ideological divorcing from the Scottish National Party. The speakers’ excitement at a supporting tweet by Alex Salmond in support of the conference received a reaction that was more polarised than the chains may have realised.

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