

Beyond the Scottish referendum

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Contrary to earlier expectations, nationalism could not be utilized to further socialist aims, nor was it a successful strategy to hasten the demise of capitalism. On the contrary, nationalism destroyed socialism by using it for nationalist ends. [...] Unless socialism is altogether a mirage, it will rise again as an international movement – or not at all. In any case, and on the basis of past experience, those interested in the rebirth of socialism must stress its internationalism most of all.

-Paul Mattick

It's less than one month to the Scottish independence referendum on 18th September.

I'm not going to tell you to vote or not vote. Some anarchists will abstain and focus on organising where they are, others will vote Yes in the hope of at least a few reforms.

But if you do vote Yes, make it a wholly pragmatic choice – don't buy into the ideology of the Yes campaign or its variant, left nationalism.

Whatever the rhetoric of some on the Left,¹ this is a Scottish nationalist campaign, just as the No camp represents a British nationalism. Anyone who cares about class struggle politics needs to strongly oppose both.

Nationalism, whatever form it takes, does two things: it tries to create a community of interest between the bosses and the working class; and it binds this community to the capitalist nation-state, reinforcing the latter's power and role in exploitation.

There is no genuinely 'progressive' form that this can take.

We have, as Paul Mattick observed, a century of experience of national liberation struggles where apparently progressive anti-imperialist movements culminated in an oppressive new ruling class.

And we could now potentially see a new wave of independence movements in Europe in response to neoliberal restructuring and the more immediate crisis of capitalism. Do we expect different results?

New divisions and rivalries among European workers are not something to be applauded. Neither is the spectacle of a decidedly bourgeois-led independence movement like that in Catalunya, where a more wealthy region seeks to stop 'subsidising' the rest of Spain.

But smaller states are better and more democratic?

Well, if we were to take a critical look at actually existing small European states we find:

- that they're certainly no more favourable to workers' organising;
- they are also coercive (which is the role of any state apparatus) and can be just as authoritarian (an exceptional example being the role played by the Catholic church backed by the Irish state);

¹ There has been a great deal of confusion, or obfuscation, over the meaning of 'nationalism'. Green party co-convenor, Patrick Harvie, for example insisted that he is not a nationalist, some have tried to distinguish between a 'good' (small or new state or civil) nationalism versus a 'bad' (large state or imperialist or ethnic) nationalism, others have made facile declarations of 'internationalism' – another term warped out of recognition. We should judge people by their actions not their rhetoric: do they foster a cross-class imagined community and social change through the state or not?

- they have been remarkably open to neoliberalism and austerity (which has had a devastating effect on small states from Finland to the Netherlands, nevermind southern Europe);
- there is a growing anti-immigrant trend related to systemic white supremacy across northern Europe;
- that some have also sent willing to send troops abroad (Denmark in Afghanistan) or have aided others who have (Ireland again, offering Shannon airport for use by the US Air Force);
- and they are always subject to the dictates of larger supranational structures and of capital itself.

‘When the people are being beaten with a stick, they are not much happier if it is called “the People’s Stick”’. – Mikhail Bakunin

The claim made both in the Yes campaign and on the Left that Scotland too can be a ‘normal democracy’, is an astounding attempt to ignore the obvious bankruptcy of representative democracy and its living critique in recent global social movements.

Even if the Scottish government is for now less likely to introduce draconian measures like the Bedroom Tax or adopt an anti-immigration stance, this is not in any sense a static situation. Massive political-economic forces will be brought to bear on post-independent government policy – it will make cuts and it will use its borders in its own economic interests.

Small states are more than capable of manufacturing consent or of over-ruling public opinion when they need to (take the famous ‘crowdsourced constitution’ in Iceland, which was in fact quietly buried by the government). The real ‘democratic deficit’ will continue post-independence.

What about the Scottish Left?

It is in content a mix of left nationalism and nostalgic social democracy. It argues against neoliberalism rather than capitalism itself – a winning strategy for regaining seats in parliament, but absolutely nothing to do with fundamental social change.

Both Common Weal and the vision of the Radical Independence campaign are concerned with trying to manage capitalism better.

Surely hegemonic on the Left, Common Weal is an explicitly class collaborationist think-tank – nicely summed up in its slogan ‘All of us first’. Its proposals in creating a high-growth economy, are in reality about increasing the rate of exploitation and outcompeting workers internationally.

Its advocacy of ‘work councils’ to smooth relations in the workplace is a necessary part of increasing productivity – i.e. profit. Where they have been used in Europe they have consistently undermined unions and workers’ militancy.

Yes: the radical case for Scottish independence, the most comprehensive statement made by members of the Radical Independence campaign, is a call for united frontism to the extent that socialism – even a bureaucratic state ‘socialism’ – isn’t even on the agenda, but is treated as a utopian project for some distant future.

It seeks to create a Scottish broad left – not an ‘anti-capitalist’ – party along the lines of Syriza or Die Linke, and it reproduces the same ‘Keynesian wish list’ based on the same weak analysis of the state and capital, critiqued so well by Michael Heinrich.

Like Common Weal, it sprinkles radical rhetoric – participatory democracy, decentralisation – on its reformism. It doesn't differ substantially from the latter, but offers mild criticism of certain aspects, including its support for the Nordic model.

The Nordic example

Small states *par excellence*, Common Weal want us to emulate the Nordic states where thanks to a number of reasons – a strong labour movement, available natural resources etc. – it has been able to maintain more of its welfare provision than Britain. From an international perspective, these countries have been labour aristocracies living off the toil of workers abroad.

But all of the Nordic states have experienced their own neoliberal offensive and inequality is growing there too. Asbjørn Wahl has shown how even in oil-rich Norway the welfare state is being eroded from within and the ideology of workfare is growing in strength.

He insists that constant reference to Nordic countries' position in international league tables is unhelpful:

The problem is that all the teams in the league table are being weakened. Or to use another image, we still have a cabin on the upper deck, but it is the upper deck of Titanic, and the ship as a whole is sinking. (2011: 11)

The Nordic example is incredibly useful, however. We can learn a great deal from the internal class contradiction and struggle in these countries, which belies the case made by social democrats here.

In the Nordic Left we find a debate going on about how to combat the challenge to welfare provision. Along with Wahl, the work of Swedish welfare academic, Daniel Ankarloo, is particularly interesting.

He argues that the labour movement there has been 'weakened by [...] class co-operation' (2009) and belief in a 'social policy road to socialism' (2008: 78–84) – i.e. that somehow the welfare model was an example of socialism in practice that just needed to be expanded. Instead, to defend existing gains as well as to fight for a different society, we need to rediscover class militancy and that this, 'radicalisation must [...] come from below in the form of the self-organisation of the labour movement' (2009).

Welfare struggles, rather than commitment to welfare statism itself, are a crucial part of this – strengthening the working class and its capacity to struggle (ibid.).

Ankarloo rightly argues that this movement needs to organise across society and in the rank-and-file of unions. We should also draw inspiration from the revolutionary syndicalist SAC in Sweden and the broader Nordic extra-parliamentary Left, which is far more organised than any similar movements in Scotland or the UK.

Renewing the struggle

None of the promised reforms of the Yes campaign are guaranteed.

We should not trust an independent Scottish state to share much wealth, to protect NHS provision, not to attack the unemployed or the disabled, not to make cuts, to deport people or remove trade union restrictions.

Some are hopeful that the grassroots pro-independence movement will produce an oppositional social movement after secession. But this is wishful thinking. It would require it to reject its own ideological basis, its very nature as a cross-class alliance organised by forces who seek to gain political power.

Aspirations for social change, for 'democratic control' and redistribution of wealth in this movement should be encouraged but pointed in a revolutionary direction.

If the nationalist project isn't soon wrecked on the rocks of its own contradictions, we will need to work to fragment it.

Whatever the result of this referendum, the lasting gains we need depend most of all on our own capacity *as a class for itself* to organise and struggle.

A genuine and practical internationalism is key to this.

Hope lies not in trying to create new labour aristocracies or the international solidarity of left nationalists, but in uniting workers struggling from below against state, capital, patriarchy and white supremacy around the world.

Daniel Ankarloo (2008), *The dualities of the Swedish welfare model*

Daniel Ankarloo (2009), *A new phase of neoliberalism: collapse and consequences for Sweden*

Asbjørn Wahl (2011), *The rise and fall of the welfare state*

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