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Scotland

Scottish independence grows nearer

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One of the first things Boris Johnson did on becoming Prime Minister was to give himself the title of ‘Minister for the Union’ and head to Scotland to try to shore up the collapsing Tory vote and prevent independence.

The constitutional crisis that has erupted over the coup proroguing parliament and ignoring legislation preventing No Deal Brexit from the EU is not just about ‘parliament versus the executive’.

It’s also a crisis of legitimacy for the entire state of the United Kingdom.

Scotland voted 55:45 to stay in the UK in the 2014 Independence referendum, but this was on the back of a ‘solemn’ promise from Tories, Labour and the LibDems that it was the only guaranteed way of staying in the EU and that further powers would be devolved in future to the Scottish Parliament. Support for independence rose from 25% to 45% during the 2014 campaign and working class and young people influenced by the Radical Independence Campaign increasingly moved to support independence.

In the EU referendum in 2016, Scotland voted strongly to remain in the EU – and the UK government has not only ignored this outcome but refused to grant further devolution.

A new independence movement has developed demanding a second referendum on Scottish independence, which recent polls now indicate is likely to be carried if the UK leaves the EU and Tory rule continues. Overwhelmingly young people are 70+% in favour of independence. 16-18 year olds now have the vote in Scottish elections and there are progressive proposals to extend the franchise beyond EU citizens to all non-UK nationalities. The Scottish Parliament has introduced legislation to organise a new referendum and a mass movement is being built through massive demonstrations, culminating in a planned major march in Edinburgh on 5 October 2019. A similar march last year attracted over 100,000 Scots demanding independence, overwhelmingly working class in composition.

This rise in support for independence is reflected in the rise in vote for the moderately social democratic Scottish National Party, now the dominant party. At their historic victory in the 2015 General Election the SNP won 56 of the 59 Westminster MPs. It was inevitable that they would fall back in the snap general election of 2017, but they still held 35 seats and a commanding position in Scottish politics, despite being the governing party in the devolved parliament for ten years.

The thirteen Scottish Tory MPs elected actually contributed more to backing up Theresa May’s government than did the DUP but are not likely to last much longer. Polls are now showing that the SNP will once again win over 50 seats under the vagaries of Westminster’s ‘First Past the Post’ system – with the Tories and Labour, once again, facing a complete wipe-out of Scottish MPs. It’s hard to believe today that in 1955 the Tories won a majority of votes in Scotland. The resignation of Ruth Davidson as leader of the Tories in Scotland, in protest against the leadership of Johnson, is a bitter blow to them. It reduces whatever modicum of talent they had but more importantly as a working-class lesbian Davidson had gone some way towards rebuilding the Tories into the second party from their traditional reactionary base, overtaking Labour in a country overwhelmingly supportive of progressive and modern social norms. Despite Johnson’s pretensions to being ‘Minister for the Union’, he is a toxic figure for Tories in modern Scotland.

The Scottish Labour Party is a pale shadow of the party in England. Its small membership is one sixth the size of the

SNP's and it was the only part of the Labour Party where the membership voted against Jeremy Corbyn for leader. Membership has failed to grow and electorally it is likely to drop below 20%, in a country where it was for decades the dominant party. It fell to fifth place in the recent EU elections and was sixth in the Scottish capital. The reason is not difficult to see: Scottish Labour not only strongly opposes independence but even opposes allowing a referendum. The majority of left wing activists and voters have long abandoned the Scottish Labour Party to support independence, and despite the narrow election of Corbyn-supporting Richard Leonard as leader against a millionaire right-winger, it comes across as hapless and useless to the majority of the Scottish working class population.

The SNP is not a socialist party. It has a chequered record of government and its recent Growth Commission report would drag Scotland into austerity. Despite trying to display 'Green' credentials, it strongly supports the oil, fossil fuel and aviation industries for which it is being heavily criticised by environmental campaigners. The SNP's support for the EU and its neo-liberal policies is unconditional – only muted criticism is directed at the EU's past behaviour towards Greece and its support for the flagrant anti-democratic attacks on the Catalan independence movement. But despite its cautious approach, it has strongly opposed Brexit from the beginning in line with overwhelming view in Scotland and looks set to reap an electoral reward from predominantly working class voters in the forthcoming general election.

Labour's John McDonnell recently rightly argued that it was entirely a decision for the Scottish Parliament as to whether there should be another Independence referendum. The Scottish Labour leadership has protested and tried to water this down in an anti-democratic direction; but Scottish Labour and the UK party still stand firmly against independence and for this they will pay a significant electoral price as their voters further decamp to the SNP.

Most people who support Scottish independence do not so because of a narrow view of 'nationalism'. They support progressive ideas of freedom of movement and open borders – internationalism. Migrants are welcome in Scotland. The school strikes over climate change received major support the length and breadth of the country.

For most of the left in Scotland, Socialist Resistance supporters included, independence opens the possibility of ridding the country of the vestiges of backward Tory rule from London and building class-struggle, solidarity, ecological action and support for free movement. While it is still a shadow of its former size and needs to find new directions and tactics, the Scottish Socialist Party nevertheless continues to build this struggle. New mobilisations and social movements are arising on climate change and the ecological crisis, international solidarity and against xenophobia. An ecosocialist group has emerged within the Scottish Green Party and there are left activists in both the SNP and (a few) Labour. A radical united left is more than a pipedream.

A new stage of the struggle for an independent socialist Scotland is opening up.

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