

# Cameron’s attack on Scottish independence referendum backfires

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National tensions over the issue of Scottish independence were raised significantly following the recent blundering intervention of David Cameron and the Con-Dem coalition.

The UK Westminster government attempted to force the hand of the Scottish National Party (SNP) Scottish administration into holding a referendum within the next 18 months, rather than SNP First Minister Alex Salmond’s preferred option of late 2014.

Crucially, the Con-Dems have insisted that a single ‘yes or no’ question on the issue of Scottish independence form the basis of the referendum. This is also counter to the SNP’s current desire for a multi-option poll including a choice of “devolution max”.

The Con-Dems also oppose the idea that 16- and 17-year olds be given a vote in the referendum, which the SNP government support. Ironically, the Lib Dem’s official policy is for votes for 16- and 17-year olds.

These three sticks, or “strings” as Salmond has described them, were wrapped up in the carrot of allowing the Scottish government to carry out a “legally binding” independence referendum, rather than the consultative one that the current devolution arrangements permit.

**Hatred of Tories**

The SNP leadership lost no time in describing Cameron’s intervention as being “Thatcher-esque”. The Tories were operating in a “London knows best fashion, trying to dictate the rules for a referendum for which they have no mandate”.

Cameron and his Lib Dem Scottish secretary Michael Moore quickly dropped the insistence that a referendum had to be held within 18 months, but by then the damage, from their point of view, had been done.

In fact Moore’s statement to the Westminster parliament described the SNP’s proposals as “unlawful” and still leaves open the possibility that the Westminster government could organise an independence referendum over the heads of the Scottish parliament. Such a ‘nuclear option’ would result in a ratcheting-up of national tensions as well as a likely boycott of such a poll.

As it is, the crass intervention by the Con-Dems has boosted the

standing of Salmond and the SNP and probably support for independence as well.

Burned deep into the Scottish national consciousness, and particularly among the working class, is the memory of the brutal anti-working class Thatcher regime. This included that government’s refusal to recognise the rights of the Scottish people to self-determination and devolution, never mind independence.

As a consequence the Tories’ electoral base was obliterated. Today the Tories have only one MP in Scotland, outnumbered by the two Giant Pandas currently residing in Edinburgh zoo!

The Con-Dem attempts to dictate the terms and rules for the referendum have been a gift for the nationalists in Scotland, who will have gained at least temporary credit for ‘standing up’ to the Tories.

**Big business party**

Of course Salmond’s refusal to bow to the pressure over the referendum does not extend to refusing to implement the Con-Dem cuts in Scotland. To a penny, all £3.7 billion of Tory/Liberal cuts have been inflicted on the people of Scotland by the self-proclaimed “Scotland’s party”. It’s also an indication of the role the SNP will play in any future independent Scotland in defending the interests of big business.

It is nevertheless possible that the SNP and Cameron will come to an agreement over the referendum. In particular, that the powers will be transferred to Holyrood to allow a “legal” referendum. The major difference is likely to be over the timing, which Cameron and Co will probably have to live with, and the SNP’s preference for a multi-option referendum.

**Salmond’s refusal to bow to the pressure over the referendum does not extend to refusing to implement the Con-Dem cuts in Scotland**

Lying behind Cameron’s intervention is the calculation that an independence referendum would be defeated if held now or soon. That’s why both the Tories and now La-

bour have come out for a “quick resolution to this issue”. They hope that the SNP can be defeated over independence and a stabilisation of the national question can be achieved.

Salmond and the SNP also understand that with independence currently supported by around one-third of the Scottish people, it is better to delay a referendum until late 2014.

They hope that the impact of the economic crisis and the savage cuts can be blamed on the Con-Dems and the lack of powers for the Scottish parliament, bolstering public support for more decisive constitutional change.

It is for this reason that the SNP are still holding out for the prospect of a multi-option referendum. In fact they are the only party in Scotland who support a question being asked on extended devolution.

They believe that even if independence was defeated, the current overwhelming public support (68% in the most recent poll) for a major extension of powers over tax, benefits, the minimum wage etc would see them in a win-win situation. “Devolution max” is a safety net for the SNP which they would claim as another step towards independence at a future stage.

Ironically, despite the insistence of Cameron, Miliband et al on a single question on independence, “devolution max” also could be a way out for the British ruling class

as well. It could avoid the instability and loss of prestige that the break-up of the UK would mean for British capitalism.

If the run-up to 2014 saw a significant rise in support for independence even the Westminster parties could back a third option, to act as a lightning conductor, in an effort to avoid a majority for independence.

The SNP leadership, pro-capitalist to the core, have long accepted a ‘gradualist’ path to independence. They would happily settle for a form of extreme autonomy, within a newly designed federal UK state.

Salmond has already made clear that an independent Scotland would maintain the Queen as head of state and keep the pound as the Scottish currency, effectively keeping monetary policy in the hands of the Bank of England. They would also use powers over corporation tax to reduce the “burden” on big business and encourage a low tax haven for inward investment. Their vision of an independent Scotland would be a nightmare for the majority of working class people and their families.

**Working class unity**

It is essential that a working class alternative is urgently built to the capitalist and cuts consensus among Scotland’s political elite, including the SNP. Any attempt to block the democratic rights of the Scottish

people should be opposed, if necessary using the full power of the trade union and labour movement as witnessed on 30 November. A multi-option referendum is a genuine democratic right which the Socialist Party Scotland fully supports.

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While supporting a parliament with full powers over the economy, benefits, the minimum wage etc we also need a socialist Scotland and to build a mass party of the working class to fight for it.

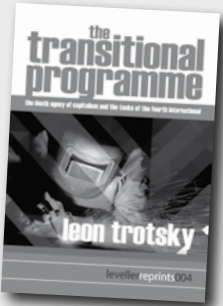
Central to this task is the need to stand implacably for the maximum unity of the working class across Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland. We fight for a voluntary and democratic socialist federation of these states as a step to a socialist Europe. Only a socialist society can end the nightmare of austerity, cuts and capitalism once and for all.

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