

Scotland after the referendum: Spirited Scottish Socialist Party conference tackles post-referendum challenges

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Contents

- [SSP contribution to Yes \(...\)](#)
- [Election strategy debate](#)
- [Rebuilding](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

October 29, 2014 - *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — Edinburgh's Augustine United Church is a cold place when the wind is howling, as it was when the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) held its 2014 annual conference there on October 25.

However, any feeling of chill disappeared when the 200-plus SSP members present got down to tackling the challenges of an inspiring new period in Scottish politics, marked by unprecedented popular engagement in activism and debate over Scotland's future.

This phase was triggered by the 55%-45% defeat of the Yes case in the country's September 18 independence referendum. Yet the most striking outcome of that win for the United Kingdom establishment has been that the "victorious" Scottish Labour Party, the main party driving the "Better Together" anti-independence campaign, is now in crisis.

At the same time, the "defeated" parties—the Scottish National Party (governing in Scotland), the Greens and the SSP—have all experienced extraordinary growth.

To date 60,000 have joined the SNP, nearly quadrupling its membership to 82,000 and overtaking the Liberal Democrats to become the third-largest party in the UK, while 5000 have joined the Greens and 2500 the SSP.

As for Scottish Labour, so far the fruits of its "victory" (which saw up to 40% of its voters in the 2011 Scottish election voting yes to independence) include: the October 24 resignation of leader Johann Lamont after Scottish Labour's general secretary was sacked by UK Labour HQ without consultation; rising factional struggle over the party's subordination to UK Labour; and the growing refusal of trade unionists who voted yes to pay into union political funds that channel money to the Labour Party.

According to Radical Independence Campaign (RIC) co-convener Jonathan Shafi, who addressed the SSP conference, this last trend opens up the possibility for a radical challenge to the Labour Party's traditional domination of the Scottish trade union movement.

If Labour yes voters don't return to the Scottish Labour fold for the 2015 UK general election, hopes of UK Labour winning against the Conservative Party and the xenophobic populist United Kingdom

Independence Party will be severely reduced. (UK Labour depends on its bloc of Scottish seats, presently 40 out of Scotland's total of 59, to offset the Conservatives' advantage in the rest of the UK.)

However, the chances of this Labour pro-independence vote staying away from Labour in 2015 will depend critically on the creation of a pro-independence electoral alliance that working-class voters who would rather die than vote SNP can support.

How such an alliance should be formed and how it should operate has already become a hot issue in the pro-independence camp, with one candidate for the SNP's deputy leadership, Stewart Hosie, proposing SNP-Yes Alliance candidates for 2015. (The SNP deputy leadership is being contested because incumbent Nicola Sturgeon will be moving to the position of leader following the resignation of first minister Alex Salmond.)

SSP contribution to Yes campaign

The issue of how best to give political expression to independence sentiment was probably the major discussion point at the SSP conference, combined with debate over how left and socialist politics could be strengthened within the broader pro-independence camp.

This discussion was a reflection of SSP members' own intense engagement with the independence campaign—within the broad pro-independence Yes Scotland platform, within RIC (grouping together non-affiliated activists as well as Greens and SSPers), within the inspirational Women for Independence movement and through its own campaigning.

The SSP's campaign saw the party organise nearly 100 meetings across Scotland and sell out of its propaganda—pamphlets outlining the socialist case for independence and for a Scottish republic cutting all ties with the British monarchy. It helped build the broader Yes campaign, but successfully projected its own position on issues like the European Union and Scotland having a currency of its own.

In opening the conference, national co-chair Bill Bonnar summed up the overall impact of all that work. "Scotland's party of socialism" had had "a transformational role in the campaign" and "had been itself transformed by the campaign". The job now was to take the SSP towards being "Scotland's mass socialist party".

Bonnar's point, later repeated at a special guest panel comprising RIC co-convener Shafi, Scottish Green Party co-convener and Edinburgh councillor Maggie Chapman and Labour for Independence co-convener Alan Grogan, was that the yes vote would never have reached 45% if it had not been for the hundreds of meetings and intensive door-knocking of working-class neighbourhoods by progressive supporters of independence.

The SSP's role had been vital. In the words of a resolution from Ayrshire branch: "The SSP's socialist arguments hit home and won many Yes votes where others could not convince working-class people."

As a result, former SSP branches have been revived and new ones established, new local leaders have stepped forward and the party has won increased respect and profile.

The party's submission to the Smith Commission [\[1\]](#), set up to discuss the transfer of new powers to Scotland promised by a panicked Westminster in the last week of the campaign, provides a good

example of how the SSP is using the political space it has gained—even though it was the one Scottish political formation pointedly excluded from representation on that commission.

The independence campaign also allowed the SSP to finally put behind it the black years of unjustified discredit and loss of influence (including of parliamentary presence) arising from the 2004-2011 case of its former Member of the Scottish Parliament Tommy Sheridan.

(The Sheridan case arose from the refusal of the SSP leadership to support Sheridan in his libel case against former Murdoch scandal rag News of the World, which had claimed that Sheridan visited sex clubs. Sheridan had in fact confessed to the SSP leadership that he visited sex clubs, but wanted them to lie and cover up for him. After winning a libel case against the New of the World, Sheridan was later found guilty of perjury, eventually serving one year of a three-year sentence before his release in 2012.) [2]

The strong presence of newer, often younger, members in the conference—and in its discussion—confirmed that political rival claims of the SSP’s “irrelevance” were wishful thinking. Certainly Labour for Independence’s Alan Grogan didn’t think that: to cheers and applause he announced his decision to resign from Labour and join the SSP.

In his conference address national co-convenor Colin Fox compared the experience of the Yes vote loss on September 18 to that of the 1888 Mid Lanarkshire by-election, where candidate Keir Hardie, standing for the first time as Independent Labour, was beaten into third place. Like that loss, representing the beginning of workers’ candidates breaking from the Liberal Party, the defeat of September 18 was a pivotal moment, a pointer to a new majority developing in a “Scotland that has changed for ever”.

Stressing that the SSP’s campaign had opposed nationalism but supported independence and internationalism Fox concluded: “If you are a socialist, you join a socialist party. If you are serious about transforming Scotland, you join the SSP:”

Election strategy debate

Debate over the SSP’s orientation to the 2015 UK general elections and the 2016 elections for the Scottish parliament emerged over proposals from the Cumbernauld and Kilsyth and Mid and East Fife branches.

The Cumbernauld and Kilsyth resolution committed “all bodies of the party to constructively engage in debates around (1) standing ‘independence’ candidates in the 2015 General Elections, (2) turning the 2016 Scottish parliamentary elections into the ‘independence’ elections, (3) Seeking to ensure socialist representation in 2016, (4) how to continue building the independence movement at local and national level, and (5) work with other political and cultural groups ... to maintain the momentum towards independence and continue the debate on how to achieve it.”

The resolutions provoked amendments that reflected different takes on the potentially contradictory goals of uniting for independence, strengthening the left and progressive pole within the overall independence camp, and strengthening the SSP and support for socialism.

For example, Glasgow Central branch wanted the SSP to be more proactive in orienting to “any discussions with progressive organisations aimed at forming an electoral alliance” for the 2016 Scottish elections. Its amendment was aimed at ensuring that the SSP is “on the front foot” in engaging with initiatives like RIC’s November 22 post-referendum conference (already sold out with

3000 bookings, three times the number who attended its two previous conferences).

This amendment passed, with some opposition that seemed to reflect concern about the SSP engaging in broader left alliances before its massively expanded new membership had sufficiently understood what the SSP itself is about.

An amendment from Renfrewshire branch proposed that the proposal to discuss “turning the 2016 Scottish parliamentary elections into the ‘independence’ elections” be replaced by “seeking to ensure socialist representation in 2015 and 2016”. Glasgow Central also proposed standing socialist candidates in a number of targeted seats in the 2015 UK general poll.

One speaker claimed the SNP and Greens were certain to reject any call for a broader pro-independence alliance in the UK general election.

Colin Fox pointed out in reply that not only was the formation of such an alliance an issue in the SNP itself (where, according to some reports, it is favourably viewed by many SNP rank-and-file members), it was important for the SSP to pursue—and be seen to pursue—a proposal that is in the best interest of the whole independence movement.

As for a separate SSP campaign in 2015, pickings would be very thin in a first-past-the-post election which, in the absence of a broader independence alliance, was bound to turn into a “tribal contest” of Labour versus SNP.

The Renfrewshire amendment proved to be the one conference vote that had to be counted, failing by 52 to 71. This result seemed to be a sign that a sizeable proportion of the party remains concerned that the SSP’s own political profile runs a risk of dilution in broader alliances.

Rebuilding

The rest of the conference resolutions covered two broad areas: rebuilding the SSP so as to make the most of its new membership (the biggest influx into an Anglo-Celtic far-left party in living memory); and policy stances on the pressing issues of the day.

In some instances these resolutions provoked Scottish versions of debates that are also being had out in many European left formations.

For example, the need for the SSP to address fracking of coal-seam gas produced resolutions from Dundee and Cumbernauld and Kilsyth branches proposing a near-unconditional ban. One speaker wondered whether fracking couldn’t be made technically safe, while Colin Fox commented that if a ban on fracking was added to the SSP’s opposition to nuclear energy, coal and gas, it became all the more urgent for the party to develop a credible energy policy. The ban on fracking was adopted.

Debate over a “Citizen’s Income” against poverty, which has engaged many European left parties, emerged when Renfrewshire branch moved that it be supported and campaigned for.

One speaker suggested that a Citizen’s Income was a completely mistaken proposal, a “silver bullet” solution for socialism that could become “an excuse for doing nothing”. An amendment from Dundee that would have deferred adoption until a detailed proposal was developed was defeated and the resolution adopted.

Measures to strengthen the SSP and its work included the re-establishment of its women’s network and measures to facilitate the involvement of new members in regular local branch life (based on

fortnightly local meetings).

Here the proposal of Ayrshire branch to “create ‘virtual’ branches under the leadership of experienced comrades who will maintain contact and promote activity through social media” provoked lively discussion.

The aim of the proposal was to overcome the dispersion of members in rural areas, especially the Highlands and islands, where it is impossible or very difficult to bring people together for face-to-face meetings, stirring a debate about the pros and cons of social media. They had been critical in building the Yes campaign in the face of the near universal opposition of the commercial media, but what role should they play in building the SSP?

Former SSP MP and feminist activist Frances Curran called for the motion to be passed unamended, saying that the party had to respect and accommodate different people’s different ways of being politically active. In the end, an amendment from Lothians branch to delete the “virtual” branches proposal was overwhelmingly lost.

The conference closed by electing Colin Fox and Sandra Webster as national joint spokespersons, Bill Bonnar and Frances Curran as national co-chairs and Ken Ferguson as the editor of Scottish Socialist Voice. A 14-member gender-balanced executive committee was also elected.

Conclusion

The gains made by the SSP in the Yes campaign and at this conference now put it in a position to reclaim a key role in Scottish left and socialist politics. Yet it does so in very different conditions from when it was founded in 1998, when it could reasonably claim to regroup the entire far left.

Now the party faces the challenge of drawing to socialism an entire new generation of largely unaffiliated activists created by the Yes campaign and the radical wing within it. It is also a generation with a very different experience of political struggle to that of the 1980s and 1990s, moulded by the miners’ strike and the struggle against the poll tax.

The complexities of this new terrain showed in the discussion—formal and informal—at the conference. How to rebuild a trade union presence when the trade unions have lost so much ground? How to combine work in traditional working-class organisations and milieus with work in newer social movements? On what issues to build the SSP in the universities? On what terms to try to build left unity, especially in relation to the thousands drawn to RIC? What work to carry out in the SSP’s own name or that of broader formations, actual or still to emerge?

These big challenges will be confronted by an SSP leadership that has shown itself capable of leading the party through the most difficult times and of “coming out the other side” with the party’s potent intervention in the independence campaign.

With the SNP government bound (despite its own protests) to implement austerity imposed from Westminster, the potential opportunities for the SSP can only grow. We can be confident that it will seize them and keep providing an example from which socialists across the advanced capitalist world can continue to learn.

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P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/4123>

* [Dick Nichols is the European correspondent of Green Left Weekly and Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal. He attended the Scottish Socialist Party's 2014 conference as a representative of the Australian Socialist Alliance. Sessions and interviews with participants at the 2014 SSP national conference can be viewed at:

[http://new.livestream.com/IndependenceLive/ssp2014/videos/66005779.](http://new.livestream.com/IndependenceLive/ssp2014/videos/66005779)]

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.scottishsocialistparty.org/ssp-submission-smith-commission/>

[2] For a full account of the Sheridan affair see: Downfall: the Tommy Sheridan Story, by Alan McCombes (Birlinn Books).